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ABSTRACT

The literary anthology is intended for non-native speakers of English, including stories written in regional and social dialects to give readers an appreciation of how images and meaning can be conveyed effectively through non-standard forms of the language. Linguistic and cultural notes are provided to make the language more accessible to readers. Discussion questions follow each story or poem to help orient readers to main themes or issues. Readings are organized thematically, with each selection focusing on the human experience. Themes include: children (8 items); families (11 items); couples (7 items); and individuals (9 items). A brief introductory section for the teacher offers background information and notes on some features of non-standard English occurring in the selections. (MSE)

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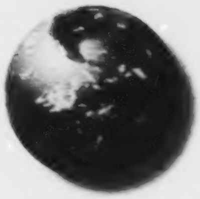
being people

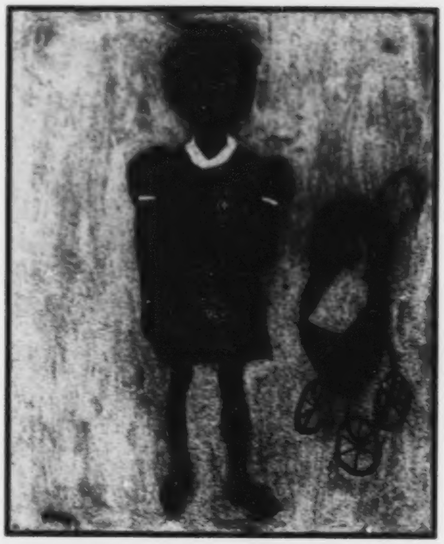


an anthology
for non-native speakers of english

edited by
thomas kral

...maybe we too busy being flowers
or fairies or strawberries
instead of something honest
and worthy of respect...
you know...like being people.

Toni Cade Bambara



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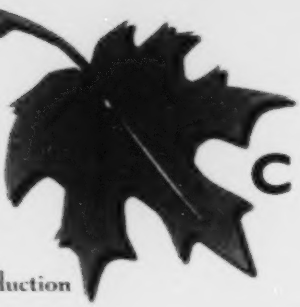

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being people

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–Thomas Kral

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Introduction

Though this literary anthology is prepared for non-native speakers of English, the only feature that distinguishes it from a collection for native speakers is the addition of cultural and linguistic notes for each selection. Otherwise, the stories and poems included in this volume appear in their original form illustrating the full richness of American English. Stories written in regional and social dialects have been included intentionally in order to give non-native speakers an appreciation of how effectively images and meaning can be conveyed through non-standard forms of the language. The linguistic notes that accompany these selections are offered not as corrections to usage but as a bridge to make the language employed by the writer more accessible to the reader whose native language is not English.

Just as reading the literature of one's own language makes one more effective in using that language in conversation and writing, reading the literature of a second language will result in more complete control of that language. Depending upon the reader's skill in English, the first reading of literary pieces may be more work than pleasure. The discussion questions that follow each story or poem should help orient readers to its main themes or issues so that readers can go back to the text to gain a fuller understanding of the author's intent. It is through the re-reading of literature that one can make a personal response to the events and characters the author portrays. In this way literature becomes relevant and fun. Read the selections silently, read them out loud with a friend or a family member, read and act out sections in class, and write down quotations in your notebook that express a thought you share, and quote it at an appropriate time to someone who will appreciate it. In this way readers have the opportunity to enjoy the writer's message and the means by which that message is expressed.

New insights into human behavior can be obtained by exploring literature that is not restricted to one's own culture. This collection draws upon the multicultural nature of American society and includes internationally famous writers and those who are less well-known. The readings have been organized thematically with each selection focusing on the human experience. Childhood memories, family relationships, love, and independence form the backdrop for a look at all sorts of people—young, old, middle-aged, idealistic, cynical, faithful, and deceitful—being people.

To the Teacher

The selections in this book are sequenced to illustrate the concept of the United States as a multi-cultural nation. Starting out with a narrative by an African-American writer, the collection continues with a story of Native Americans, followed by an account of a young American boy of European descent. Teachers may choose to follow the order given in the text or they may opt to rearrange the selections or even delete some that they feel are linguistically or culturally problematic for their students. Teachers should not assign any story or poem to their classes if they feel uncomfortable with either its content or language.

The characters in some of the stories may speak a non-standard variety of English, and their discourse may depart from polite usage or political correctness. But if we consider the participants, the setting, the situation, and the tone of the verbal exchanges in the stories, we will see that the characters use the variety of American English that reflects their social group membership and their relationship with their interlocutors. Students are not, of course, advised to employ these non-standard variants in their own speech, but they will gain a fuller grasp of American English through this exposure to authentic speech as it is captured in literature. For better understanding of the non-standard variants of American English that appear in the anthology, the following information may be useful.

Some Features of Non-Standard English

•Deletion of unstressed first syllable: because=[cause], around=[round], unless= [les] •Simplication of glides and diphthongs: I=ah; my=mah; time=tahm; you=ya or yuh •Modification of /ng/ to /n/: nothing=nothin; asking=askin; going=goin •Modification of the voiced /th/ in initial and final positions: they=dey; that=dat •Use of *ain't* as the negative form for *is, are, am,* and the auxiliaries *have* and *has*. •Multiple negation: "You ain't never worked..." "I didn't have no better sense..." •Repetition of noun subject with pronoun: "Shelby, he told us..." •Omission of the be verb in contracted forms -'s; -'re in Black English: "...maybe we too busy." "He quick in everythin." •*Be* inclusion: In Black English the base form of *be* may indicate habitual aspect of future time: "They be slow all the time." "The boy be here soon." •Question patterns without the auxiliary *do* (Black English): "What he want?" "Where you go to school?" •Completive aspect with *done* (Black English): "So many people had done named me different names."

children

I was once a strawberry in a Hansel and Gretel pageant
when I was in nursery school and didn't have no better sense
than to dance on tiptoe with my arms in a circle over my head
doing umbrella steps and being a perfect fool just so my
mother and father could come dressed up and clap.
You'd think they know better than to
encourage that kind of nonsense.
I am not a strawberry.

Toni Cade Bambara

Raymond's Run

②

TONI CADE BAMBARA

Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, a young African American in Harlem (a district of New York City) tells us how she feels about running, her mentally-retarded brother Raymond, her family, and her competitors, Cynthia and Gretchen. She also reveals some thought-provoking insights about human nature.

I don't have much work to do around the house like some girls. My mother does that. And I don't have to earn my pocket money by hustling; George runs errands for the big boys and sells Christmas cards. And anything else that's got to get done, my father does. All I have to do in life is mind my brother Raymond, which is enough. 3

Sometimes I slip and say my little brother Raymond. But as any fool can see he's much bigger and he's older too. But a lot of people call him my little brother cause he needs looking after cause he's not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too, especially when George was minding him. But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. And I don't play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice, which is how I got the name Squeaky. And if things get too rough, I run. And as anybody can tell you, I'm the fastest thing on two feet.

There is no track meet that I don't win the first place medal. I used to win the twenty-yard dash when I was a little kid in kindergarten. Nowadays it's the fifty-yard dash. And tomorrow I'm subject to run the quarter-meter relay all by myself and come in first, second, and third. The big kids call me Mercury cause I'm the swiftest thing in the neighborhood. Everybody knows that—except two people who know better, my father and me.

He can beat me to Amsterdam Avenue with me having a two fire-hydrant headstart and him running with his hands in his pockets and whistling. But that's private information. Cause can you imagine some thirty-five-year-old man stuffing himself into PAL shorts to race little kids? So as far as everyone's concerned, I'm the fastest and that goes for Gretchen, too, who has put out the tale that she is going to win the first place medal this year. Ridiculous. In the second place, she's got short legs. In the third place, she's got freckles." In the first place, no one can beat me and that's all there is to it.

I'm standing on the corner admiring the weather and about to take a stroll down Broadway so I can practice my breathing exercises, and I've got Raymond walking on the inside close to the buildings cause he's subject to fantasy and starts thinking he's a circus performer and that the curb is a tightrope strung high in the air. And sometimes after a rain, he likes to step down off his tightrope right into the gutter and slosh around getting his shoes and cuffs wet. Then I get hit when I get home. Or sometimes if you don't watch him, he'll dash across traffic to the island in the middle of Broadway and give the pigeons a fit.[10] Then I have to go behind him apologizing to all old people sitting around trying to get some sun and getting all upset with the pigeons fluttering around them, scattering their newspapers and upsetting the waxpaper lunches in their laps. So I keep Raymond on the inside of me, and he plays like he's driving a stage coach which is O. K. by me so long as he doesn't run me over or interrupt my breathing exercises, which I have to do on account of I'm serious about my running and don't care who knows it.

Now some people like to act like things come easy to them, won't let on[11] that they practice. Not me. I'll high prance down 34th Street like a rodeo pony to keep my knees strong even if it does get my mother uptight so that she walks ahead like she's not with me, don't know me, is all by herself on a shopping trip, and I am somebody else's crazy child.

Now you take Cynthia Procter for instance. She's just the opposite. If there's a test tomorrow, she'll say something like, "Oh I guess I'll play handball this afternoon and watch television tonight," just to let you know she ain't thinking about the test. Or like last week when she won the spelling bee for the millionth time, "A good thing you got 'receive,' Squeaky, cause I would have got it wrong. I completely forgot about the spelling bee." And she'll clutch the lace on her blouse like it was a narrow escape. Oh, brother.

But of course when I pass her house on my early morning trots around the block, she is practicing the scales on the piano over and over and over and over. Then in music class, she always lets herself get bumped around so she falls accidently on purpose onto the piano stool and is so surprised to find herself sitting there, and so decides just for fun to try out the ole[12] keys and what do you know—Chopin's waltzes just spring out of her fingertips and she's the most surprised thing in the world. A regular prodigy. I could kill people like that.

I stay up all night studying the words for the spelling bee. And you can see me anytime of day practicing running. I never walk if I can trot and shame on Raymond if he can't keep up. But of course he does, cause if he hangs back someone's liable[13] to walk up to him and get smart, or take his allowance from him, or ask him where he got that great big pumpkin head. People are so stupid sometimes.

So I'm strolling down Broadway breathing out and breathing in on count of seven, which is my lucky number, and here comes Gretchen and her sidekicks[14]—Mary Louise who used to be a friend of mine when she first moved to Harlem from Baltimore and got beat up by everybody till I took up for her[15] on account of her mother and my mother used to sing in the same choir when they were young girls, but people ain't grateful, so now she hangs out[16] with the new girl Gretchen and talks about me like a dog; and Rosie who is as fat as I am skinny and has a big mouth where Raymond is concerned and is too stupid to know that there is not a big deal of difference between herself and Raymond and that she can't afford to throw stones.[17] So they are steady coming up Broadway and I see right away that it's going to be one of those Dodge City scenes[18] cause the street ain't that big and they're close to the buildings just as we are. First I think I'll step into the candy store and look over the new comics and let them pass. But that's chicken[19] and I've got a reputation to consider. So then I think I'll just walk straight on through them[20] or over them if necessary. But as they get to me, they slow down. I'm ready to fight, cause like I said I don't feature a whole lot of chitchat,[21] I much prefer to just knock you down right from the jump and save everybody a lotta[22] precious time.

"You signing up for the May Day races?" smiles Mary Louise, only it's not a smile at all.

A dumb question like that doesn't deserve an answer. Besides, there's just me and Gretchen standing there really, so no use wasting my breath talking to shadows.

"I don't think you're going to win this time," says Rosie, trying to signify[23] with her hands on her hips all salty,[24] completely forgetting that I have whupped[25] her behind many times for less salt than that.

"I always win cause I'm the best," I say straight at Gretchen who is, as far as I'm concerned, the only one talking in this ventriloquist-dummy routine.

Gretchen smiles but it's not a smile and I'm thinking that girls never really smile at each other because they don't know how and don't want to know how and there's probably no one to teach us how cause grown-up girls don't know either. Then they all look at Raymond who has just brought his mule team to a standstill. And they're about to see what trouble they can get into through him.

"What grade you in now, Raymond?"

"You got anything to say to my brother, you say it to me, Mary Louise Williams of Raggedy Town, Baltimore."

"What are you, his mother?" sasses Rosie.

"That's right, Fatso. And the next word out of anybody and I'll be their mother too." So they just stand there and Gretchen shifts from one leg to the other and so do they. Then Gretchen puts her hands on her hips and is about to say something with her freckle-face self but doesn't. Then she walks around me looking me up and down but keeps walking up Broadway, and her sidekicks follow her. So me and Raymond smile at each other and he says, "Gidyap"[6] to his team and I continue with my breathing exercises, strolling down Broadway toward the icey man[7] on 145th with not a care in the world cause I am Miss Quicksilver[8] herself.

I take my time getting to the park on May Day because the track meet is the last thing on the program. The biggest thing on the program is the May Pole dancing which I can do without, thank you, even if my mother thinks it's shame I don't take part and act like a girl for a change. You'd think my mother would be grateful not to have to make me a white organdy dress with big satin sash and buy me new white baby-doll shoes that can't be taken out of the box till the big day. You'd think she'd be glad her daughter ain't there prancing around a May Pole getting the new clothes all dirty and sweaty and trying to act like a fairy or a flower or whatever you're supposed to be when you should be trying to be yourself, whatever that is, which is, as far as I am concerned, a poor Black girl who really can't afford to buy shoes and new dress you only wear once a lifetime cause it won't fit next year.

I was once a strawberry in a Hansel and Gretel pageant when I was in nursery school and didn't have no better sense than to dance on tiptoe with my arms in a circle over my head doing umbrella steps and being a perfect fool just so my mother and father could come dressed up and clap. You'd think they know better than to encourage that kind of nonsense. I am not a strawberry. I do not dance on my toes. I run. That is what I am all about. So I always come late to the May Day program, just in time to get my number pinned on and lay in the grass till they announce the fifty-yard dash.

I put Raymond in the little swings, which is a tight squeeze this year and will be impossible next year. Then I look around for Mr. Pearson who pins the numbers on. I'm really looking for Gretchen if you want to know the truth, but she's not around. The park is jam-packed. Parents in hats and corsages and breast-pocket handkerchiefs peeking up. Kids in white dresses and light blue suits. The parkees[9] unfolding chairs and chasing the rowdy kids from Lenox as if they had no right to be there. The big guys with their caps on backwards leaning against the fence swirling the basketballs on the tips of their fingers waiting for all these crazy people to clear out the park so they can play. Most of the kids in my class are carrying bass drums and glockenspiels and flutes. You'd think they'd put in a few bongos or something for real like that.

Then here comes Mr. Pearson with his clipboard and his cards and pencils and whistles and safety pins and fifty million other things he's always dropping all over the place with his clumsy self. He sticks out in a crowd cause he's on stilts.[10] We used to call him Jack and the Beanstalk to get him mad. But I'm the only one that can outrun him and get away, and I'm too grown for that silliness now.

"Well, Squeaky," he says checking my name off the list and handing me number seven and two pins. And I'm thinking he's got no right to call me Squeaky, if I can't call him Beanstalk.

"Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker," I correct him and tell him to write it down on his board.

"Well, Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, going to give someone else a break this year?" I squint at him real hard to see if he is seriously thinking I should lose the race on purpose just to give someone else a break.

"Only six girls running this time," he continues, shaking his head sadly like it's my fault all of New York didn't turn out in sneakers.[11] "That new girl should give you a run for your money." He looks around the park for Gretchen like a periscope in a submarine movie. "Wouldn't it be a nice gesture if you were…to ahhh…"

I give him such a look he couldn't finish putting that idea into words. Grownups got a lot of nerve sometimes. I pin number seven to myself and stomp away—I'm so burnt.[12] And I go straight for the track and stretch out on the grass while the band winds up with "Oh the Monkey Wrapped His Tail Around the Flag Pole," which my teacher calls by some other name. The man on the loudspeaker is calling everyone over to the track and I'm on my back looking at the sky trying to pretend I'm in the country, but I can't, because even grass in the city feels hard as sidewalk and there's just no pretending you are

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anywhere but in a "concrete jungle" as my grandfather says.

The twenty-yard dash takes all of the two minutes cause most of the little kids don't know no better than to run off the track or run the wrong way or run smack into the fence and fall down and cry. One little kid though has got the good sense to run straight for the white ribbon up ahead so he wins. Then the second graders line up for the thirty-yard dash and I don't even bother to turn my head to watch cause Raphael Perez always wins. He wins before he even begins by psyching the runners,[33] telling them they're going to trip on their shoelaces and fall on their faces or lose their shorts or something, which he doesn't really have to do since he is very fast, almost as fast as I am. After that is the forty-yard dash which I use to run when I was in first grade. Raymond is hollering from the swings cause he knows I'm about to do my thing[34] cause the man on the loudspeaker has just announced the fifty-yard dash, although he might just as well be giving a recipe for Angel Food cake cause you can hardly make out what he's saying for the static.[35] I get up and slip off my sweat pants and then I see Gretchen standing at the starting line kicking her legs out like a pro.[36] Then as I get into place I see that ole Raymond is in line on the other side of the fence, bending down with his fingers on the ground just like he knew what he was doing. I was going to yell at him but then I didn't. It burns up your energy to holler.

Every time, just before I take off in a race, I always feel like I'm in a dream, the kind of dream you have when you're sick with fever and feel all hot and weightless. I dream I'm flying over a sandy beach in the early morning sun, kissing the leaves of the trees as I fly by. And there's always the smell of apples, just like in the country when I was little and use to think I was a choo-choo train, running through the fields of corn and chugging up the hill to the orchard. And all the time I'm dreaming this, I get lighter and lighter until I'm flying over the beach again, getting blown through the sky like a feather that weighs nothing at all. But once I spread my fingers in the dirt and crouch over for the Get on Your Mark, the dream goes and I am solid again and am telling myself, Squeaky you must win, you must win, you are the fastest thing in the world, you can even beat your father up Amsterdam if you really try. And then I feel my weight coming back just behind my knees then down to my feet then into the earth and the pistol shot explodes in my blood and I am off and weightless again, flying past the other runners, my arms pumping up and down and the whole world is quiet except for the crunch as I zoom over the gravel in the track. I glance to my left and there is no one. To the right a blurred Gretchen who's got her chin jutting out as if it would win the race all by itself. And on the other side of the fence is Raymond with his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him, running in his very own style and the first time I ever saw that and I almost stop to watch my brother Raymond on his first run. But the white ribbon is bouncing toward me and I tear past it into the distance till my feet with a mind of their own start digging up footfuls of dirt and brake me short. Then all the kids standing on the side pile on me, banging me on the back and slapping my head with their May Day programs, for I have won again and everybody on 151st Street can walk tall[37] for another year.

"In first place..." the man on the loudspeaker is clear as a bell now. But then he pauses and the loudspeaker starts to whine. Then static. And I lean down to catch my breath and here comes Gretchen walking back for she's overshot the finish line too, huffing and puffing with her hands on hips taking it slow, breathing in steady time like a real pro and I sort of[38] like her a little for the first time. "In first place..." and then three or four voices get all mixed up on the loudspeaker and I dig my sneaker into the grass and stare at Gretchen who's staring back, we both wondering just who did win. I can hear old Beanstalk arguing with the man on the loudspeaker and then a few others running their mouths about what the stop watches say.

Then I hear Raymond yanking at the fence to call me and I wave to shush him, but he keeps rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage like in them gorilla movies, but then like a dancer or something he starts climbing up nice and easy but very fast. And it occurs to me, watching how smoothly he climbs hand over hand and remembering how he looked running with his arms down to his side and with the wind pulling his mouth back and his teeth showing and all, it occurred to me that Raymond would make a very fine runner. Doesn't he always keep up with me on my trots? And he surely knows how to breathe in counts of seven cause he's always doing it at the dinner table, which drives my brother George up the wall.[39] And I'm smiling to beat the band[40] cause if I've lost this race, or if me and Gretchen tied, or even if I've won, I can always retire as a runner and begin a whole new career as a coach with Raymond my champion. After all, with a little more study I can beat Cynthia and her phony self[41] at the spelling bee. And if I bugged[42] my mother, I could get piano lessons and become a star. And I have a big rep as the baddest thing around."[43] And I've got a roomful of ribbons and medals and awards. But what has Raymond got to call his own?

So I stand there with my new plan, laughing out loud by this time as Raymond jumps down from the fence and runs over with his teeth showing and his arms down to the side which no one before him has quite mastered as a running style. And by the time he comes over I'm jumping up and down so glad to see him—my brother Raymond, a great runner in the family tradition. But of course everyone thinks I'm jumping up and down because the men on the loudspeaker have finally gotten themselves together and compared notes and are announcing "In first place—Miss Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker." (Dig that.)[44] "In second place—Miss Gretchen P. Lewis." And I look over at Gretchen wondering what the P stands for. And I smile. Cause she's good, no doubt about it. Maybe she'd like to help me coach Raymond; she obviously is serious about running, as any fool can see. And she nods to congratulate me and then she smiles. And I smile. We stand there with this big smile of respect between us. It's about as real a smile as girls can do for each other, considering we don't practice real smiling every day you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries[45] instead of something honest and worthy of respect…you know…like being people.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *hustling*: doing a variety of chores to earn money
2. *(to) mind my brother*: pay attention to him; take care of him
3. *smart mouths*: people who think they are clever but who talk too much
4. *(to) play the dozens*: play a ritualistic insult game, in which adolescent African American boys exchange insults about their parents. (The insults are so far-fetched and exaggerated that they couldn't possibly be taken seriously.)
5. *somebody in my face*: someone who is standing too close
6. *squeaky*: having a sharp, thin, high-pitched sound
7. *PAL shorts*: a brand of athletic shorts
8. *(to) put out the tale*: tell everyone the story
9. *freckles*: small brown spots on the skin (from exposure to the sun)
10. *give the pigeons a fit*: scare the pigeons
11. *(to) let on*: reveal; allow others to know something you do
12. *ole (the ole keys)*: the old keys (a form of endearment)
13. *liable (someone's liable to walk up)*: someone is likely to come; it's possible that someone will come
14. *sidekicks*: friends
15. *(to) take up for someone*: defend and protect someone
16. *(to) hang out with*: spend time with someone on a regular basis
17. *(to) throw stones (she can't afford to throw stones)*: she isn't perfect so she has no right to criticize others who are imperfect
18. *Dodge City scenes*: gun duels between the good and the bad guys
19. *chicken*: cowardly
20. *walk straight through them*: walk past them
21. *chitchat*: casual conversation
22. *a lotta* = a lot of
23. *(to) signify*: show one's personal attitude toward another person by walking, moving, or standing in special ways
24. *salty*: full of nervous energy and ready for a fight; quarrelsome
25. *whupped* = whipped; spanked; beat
26. *Gidyap*: a command given to horses or mules to move forward
27. *icey man*: the man selling sweet ices on the street
28. *Miss Quicksilver*: as fast as the Roman's messenger god, Mercury
29. *parkees*: park workers
30. *he's on stilts*: he is so tall he seems to be standing on poles
31. *(to) turn out in sneakers*: come dressed in tennis shoes (ready to run in the race)
32. *so burnt*: so angry
33. *psyching the runners*: making the runners psychologically uneasy or uncomfortable
34. *(to) do my thing*: do my special act; do something I can do especially well
35. *static*: electrical interference
36. *pro*: professional
37. *(to) walk tall (Everybody on 151st Street can walk tall.)*: They can all hold up their heads with pride
38. *sort of (to sort of like someone)*: (to) like someone moderately well
39. *(to) drive someone up the wall*: make someone very nervous or crazy
40. *(to) beat the band*: do something with all one's strength, as hard as one can, with all one's heart
41. *Cynthia and her phony self*: Cynthia does not act truthfully; she pretends
42. *(to) bug someone*: keep after or continue annoying and irritating some one until s/he gives in
43. *a big rep as the baddest thing around*: a reputation as the most wonderful runner in the neighborhood (Bad takes on an opposite meaning here.)
(to) wind up with: finish with; end up with
44. *(to) dig (something or someone)*: notice, understand, or really like something
45. *we too busy being flowers or fairies on strawberries*: we are too busy playing the roles of flowers, etc. in school pageants

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The nickname of the heroine is Squeaky. Why is she called this? What other nicknames does she have?*

2. *What is Squeaky's role in the family? What do the other family members do? In your opinion is Squeaky a good sister? A good daughter?*

3. *Describe Squeaky's attitude toward life and the people she comes into contact with.*

4. *What is Squeaky's feeling about respect? Does she try to earn it? To whom does she show respect?*

5. *How do Squeaky's feelings about Gretchen change? When? Why?*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Ta-Na-E-Ka

⑧

MARY WHITEBIRD

All children of the Kaw tribe were expected to complete the ritual of Ta-Na-E-Ka, a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Whitebird's experience shows how ancient traditions may be reinterpreted to reflect the changes of modern life.

As my birthday drew closer, I had awful nightmares about it. I was reaching the age at which all Kaw[1] Indians had to participate in Ta-Na-E-Ka. Well, not all Kaws. Many of the younger families on the reservation were beginning to give up the old customs. But my grandfather, Amos Deer Leg, was devoted to tradition. He still wore handmade beaded moccasins instead of shoes, and kept ⑨ his iron-gray hair in tight braids. He could speak English, but he spoke it only with white men. With his family he used a Sioux[2] dialect.

Grandfather was one of the last living Indians (he died in 1953 when he was 81) who actually fought against the U.S. Cavalry. Not only did he fight, he was wounded in a skirmish at Rose Creek—a famous encounter in which the celebrated Kaw chief Flat Nose lost his life. At the time, my grandfather was only 11 years old.

Eleven was a magic word among the Kaws. It was the time of Ta-Na-E-Ka, the "flowering of adulthood." It was the age, my grandfather informed us hundreds of times, "when a boy could prove himself to be a warrior and a girl took the first steps to womanhood."

"I don't want to be a warrior," my cousin, Roger Deer Leg, confided to me. "I'm going to become an accountant."

"None of the other tribes make girls go through the endurance ritual,"[3] I complained to my mother.

"It won' t be as bad as you think, Mary," my mother said, ignoring my protests. "Once you've gone through it, you'll certainly never forget it. You'll be proud."

I even complained to my teacher, Mrs. Richardson, feeling that, as a white woman, she would side with me. She didn't. "All of us have rituals of one kind or another," Mrs. Richardson said. "And look at it this way: How many girls have the opportunity to compete on equal terms with boys? Don't look down on your heritage."

Heritage, indeed? I had no intention of living on a reservation[4] for the rest of my life. I was a good student. I loved school. My fantasies were about knights in armor and fair ladies in flowing gowns, being saved from dragons. It never once occurred to me that being an Indian was exciting. But I've always thought that the Kaw were the originators of the women's liberation movement.[5] No other Indian tribe—and I've spent half a lifetime researching the subject—treated women more "equally" than the Kaw. Unlike most of the subtribes of the Sioux Nation, the Kaw allowed men and women to eat together. And hundreds of years before we were "acculturated,"[6] a Kaw woman had the right to refuse a prospective husband even if her father arranged the match.

The wisest women (generally wisdom was equated with age) often sat in tribal councils.[7] Furthermore, most Kaw legends revolve around "Good Woman," a kind of super-squaw, a Joan of Arc[8] of the high plains. Good Woman led Kaw warriors into battle after battle from which they seemed to emerge victorious.

And girls as well as boys were required to undergo Ta-Na-E-Ka.

The actual ceremony varied from tribe to tribe, but since the Indians' life on the plains was dedicated to survival, Ta-Na-E-Ka was a test of survival.

"Endurance is the loftiest virtue of the Indian," my grandfather explained. "To survive, we must endure. When I was a boy, Ta-Na-E-Ka was more than the mere symbol it is now. We were painted white with the juice of a sacred herb[9] and sent naked into the wilderness without so much as a knife. We couldn't return until the white had worn off. It took almost 18 days, and during that time we had to stay alive, trapping food, eating insects and roots and berries, and watching out for enemies. And we did have enemies—both the white soldiers and the Omaha[10] warriors, who were always trying to capture Kaw boys and girls undergoing their endurance test. It was an exciting time."

"What happened if you couldn't make it?" Roger asked. He was born only three days after I was, and we were being trained for Ta-Na-E-Ka together. I was happy to know he was frightened too.

"Many didn't return," Grandfather said. "Only the strongest and shrewdest. Mothers were not allowed to weep over those who didn't return. If a Kaw couldn't survive, he or she wasn't worth weeping over. It was our way."

"What a lot of hooey,"[11] Roger whispered. "I'd give anything to get out of it."

"I don't see how we have any choice," I replied.

Roger gave my arm a little squeeze. "Well, it's only five days."

Five days! Maybe it was better than being painted white and set out for naked for 18 days. But not much better.

We were to be sent, barefoot and in bathing suits, into the woods. Even our very traditional parents put their foot down when Grandfather suggested we go naked. For five days we'd have to live off the land, keeping warm as best we could, getting food where we could. It was May, but on the northernmost reaches of the Missouri River the days were still chilly and the nights were fiercely cold.

Grandfather was in charge of the month's training for Ta-Na-E-Ka. One day he caught a grasshopper and demonstrated how to pull its legs and wings off in one flick of the fingers and how to swallow it.

I felt sick, and Roger turned green. "It's a darn good thing it's 1947," I told Roger teasingly. "You'd make a terrible warrior." Roger just grimaced.

"I knew one thing. This particular Kaw Indian girl wasn't going to swallow a grasshopper no matter how hungry she got. And then I had an idea. Why hadn't I thought of it before? It would have saved nights of bad dreams about squooshy[12] grasshoppers.

I headed straight for my teacher's house. "Mrs. Richardson," I said, "would you lend me five dollars?"

"Five Dollars!" she exclaimed. "What for?"

"You remember the ceremony I talked about?"

"Ta-Na-E-Ka. Of course. Your parents have written me and asked me to excuse you from school so you can participate in it."

"Well, I need some things for the ceremony," I replied, in a half truth. "I don't want to ask my parents for the money."

"It's not a crime to borrow money, Mary. But how can you pay it back?"

"I'll baby-sit for you 10 times."

"That's more than fair," she said, going to her purse and handing me a crisp new five-dollar bill. I'd never had that much money at once.

"I'm happy to know the money's going to be put to a good use," Mrs.Richardson said.

A few days later, the ritual began with a long speech from my grandfather about how we had reached the age of decision, how we now had to fend for ourselves[13] and prove that we could survive the most horrendous of ordeals. All the friends and relatives who gathered at our house for dinner made jokes about their own Ta-Na-E-Ka experiences. They all advised us to fill up now, since for the next five days we'd be gorging[13] ourselves on crickets. Neither Roger nor I was very hungry. "I'll probably laugh about this when I'm an accountant," Roger said, trembling.

"Are you trembling?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

"I'm happy to know boys tremble too," I said.

At six the next morning we kissed our parents and went off to the woods.

"Which side do you want?" Roger asked. According to the rules, Roger and I would stake out "territories" in separate areas of the woods and we weren't to communicate during the entire ordeal.

"I'll go toward the river, if it's OK with you," I said.

"Sure," Roger answered. "What difference does it make?"

To me, it made a lot of difference. There was a marina a few miles up the river and there were boats moored[14] there. At least, I hoped so. I figured that a boat was a better place to sleep than under a pile of leaves.

"Why do you keep holding your head?" Roger asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just nervous," I told him. Actually, I was afraid I'd lose the five-dollar bill, which I had tucked[15] into my hair with a bobby pin. As we came to a fork in the trail, Roger shook my hand. "Good luck, Mary,"

"N'ko-n'ta," I said. It was the Kaw word for courage.

The sun was shining and it was warm, but my bare feet began to hurt immediately. I spied one of the berry bushes Grandfather had told us about.

"You're lucky," he had said. "The berries are ripe in the spring, and they are delicious and nourishing." They were orange and fat and I popped one into my mouth.

Argh! I spat it out. It was awful and bitter, and even grasshoppers were probably better-tasting, although I never intended to find out.

I sat down to rest my feet. A rabbit hopped out from under the berry bush. He nuzzled the berry I'd spat out and ate it. He picked another one and ate that too. He liked them. He looked at me, twitching his nose. I watched a redheaded woodpecker bore into an elm tree, and I caught a glimpse of a civet cat[16] waddling through some twigs. All of a I sudden realized I was no longer frightened. Ta-Na-E-Ka might be more fun than I'd anticipated.[17] I got up and headed toward the marina.

"Not one boat," I said to myself dejectedly.[18] But the restaurant on the shore, "Ernie's Riverside," was open. I walked in, feeling silly in my bathing suit. The man at the counter was big and tough-looking. He wore sweatshirt with the words "Fort Sheridan, 1944," and he had only three fingers on one of his hand. He asked me what I wanted."

"A hamburger and a milk shake," I said, holding the five-dollar bill in my hand so he'd know I had money.

"That's a pretty heavy breakfast, honey," he said.

"That's what I always have for breakfast," I lied.

"Forty-five cents," he said, bringing me the food. (Back in 1947 hamburgers were 25 cents and milk shakes were 20 cents.) "Delicious," I thought. "Better'n grasshoppers—and Grandfather never once mentioned that I couldn't eat hamburgers."

While I was eating, I had a grand idea. Why not sleep in the restaurant? I went to the ladies' room and made sure the window was unlocked. Then went back outside and played along the river bank, watching the water birds and trying to identify each one. I planned to look for a beaver dam the next day.

The restaurant closed at sunset, and I watched the three-fingered man drive away. Then I climbed in the un-locked window. There was a night-light on, so I didn't turn on any lights. But there was a radio on the counter. I turned it on to a music program. It was warm in the restaurant, and I was hungry. I helped myself to a glass of milk and a piece of pie, intending to keep a list of what I'd eaten so I could leave money. I also planned to get up early, sneak out through the window, and head for the woods before the three-fingered man returned. I turned off the radio, wrapped myself in the man's apron, and, in spite of the hardness of the floor, fell asleep.

"What the heck are you doing here, kid?"

It was the man's voice.

It was morning. I'd overslept. I was scared.

"Hold it, kid. I just wanna know what you're doing here. You lost? You must be from the reservation. Your folks must be worried sick about you. Do they have a phone?"

"Yes, yes," I answered. "But don't call them."

I was shivering. The man, who told me his name was Ernie, made me a cup of hot chocolate while I explained about Ta-Na-E-Ka.

"Darnedest thing I ever heard," he said, when I was through. "Lived next to the reservation all my life and this is the first I've heard of Ta-Na whatever-you-call-it." He looked at me, all goosebumps in my bathing suit. "Pretty silly thing to do to a kid," he muttered.

That was just what I'd been thinking for months, but when Ernie said it, I became angry. "No, it isn't silly. It's a custom of the Kaw. We've been doing this for hundreds of years. My mother and my grandfather and everybody in my family went through this ceremony. It's why the Kaw are great warriors."

"OK, great warrior," Ernie chuckled, "suit yourself. And, if you want to stick around, it's OK with me." Ernie went to the broom closet and tossed me a bundle. "That's the lost-and-found closet," he said. "Stuff people left on boats. Maybe there's something to keep you warm."

The sweater fitted loosely, but it felt good. I felt good. And I'd found a new friend. Most important, I was surviving Ta-Na-E-Ka.

My grandfather had said the experience would be filled with adventure, and I was having my fill. And, Grandfather has never said we couldn't accept hospitality.

I stayed at Ernie's Riverside for the entire period. In the mornings I went into the woods and watched the animals and picked flowers for each of the tables in Ernie's. I had never felt better. I was up early enough to watch the sun rise on the Missouri, and I went to bed after it set. I ate everything I wanted—insisting that Ernie take all my money for the food. "I'll keep this in trust for you, Mary," Ernie promised, "in case you are ever desperate for five dollars." (He did too, but that's another story.)

I was sorry when the five days were over. I'd enjoyed every minute with Ernie. He taught me how to make western omelets and to make Chili Ernie Style (still one of my favorite dishes). And I told Ernie all about the legends of the Kaw. I hadn't realized I knew so much about my people.

But Ta-Na-E-Ka was over, and as I approached my house, at about 9:30 in the evening, I became nervous all over again. What if Grandfather asked me about the berries and the grasshoppers? And my feet were hardly cut. I hadn't lost a pound and my hair was combed.

"They'll be so happy to see me," I told myself hopefully, "that they won't ask too many questions."

I opened the door. My grandfather was in the front room. He was wearing the ceremonial beaded deerskin shirt which had belonged to his grandfather. "N'g'da'ma," he said. "Welcome back."

I embraced my parents warmly, letting go only when I saw my cousin Roger sprawled on the couch. His eyes were red and swollen. He'd lost weight. His feet were an unsightly mass of blood and blisters, and he was moaning: "I made it, see. I made it. I'm a warrior. A warrior."

My grandfather looked at me strangely. I was clean, obviously well-fed, and radiantly healthy. My parents got the message. My uncle and aunt gazed at me with hostility.

Finally my grandfather asked, "What did you eat to keep you so well?"

I sucked in my breath and blurted out the truth: "Hamburgers and milkshakes."

"Hamburgers!" My grandfather growled." "Milk shakes!" Roger moaned. "You didn't say we had to eat grasshoppers," I said sheepishly.

"Tell us all about your Ta-Na-E-Ka," my grandfather commanded.

I told them everything, from borrowing the five dollars, to Ernie's kindness, to observing the beaver.

"That's not what I trained you for," my grandfather said sadly.

I stood up. "Grandfather, I learned that Ta-Na-E-Ka is important. I didn't think so during training. I was scared stiff of it. I handled it my way. And I learned I had nothing to be afraid of. There's no reason in 1947 to eat grasshoppers when you can eat a hamburger."

I was inwardly shocked at my own audacity. But I liked it. "Grandfather, I'll bet you never ate one of those rotten berries yourself."

Grandfather laughed! He laughed aloud! My mother and father and aunt and uncle were all dumbfounded. Grandfather never laughed. Never.

"Those berries—they are terrible," Grandfather admitted. "I never swallow them. I found a dead deer on the first day of my Ta-Na-E-Ka—shot by a soldier, probably—and he kept my belly full for the entire period of the test!"

Grandfather stopped laughing. "We should send you out again," he said.

I looked at Roger. "You're pretty smart, Mary," Roger groaned. I'd never have thought of what you did."

"Accountants just have to be good at arithmetic," I said comfortably. "I'm terrible at arithmetic."

Roger tried to smile, but couldn't. My grandfather called me to him.

"You should have done what your cousin did. But I think you are more alert to what is happening to our people today than we are. I think you would have passed the test under any circumstances, in any time. Somehow, you know how to exist in a world that wasn't made for Indians. I don't think you're going to have any trouble surviving."

Grandfather wasn't entirely right. But I'll tell about that another time.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *Kaw (also Kansa)*: plains tribe of North American Indians that lived in what is now known as the state of Kansas.
2. *Sioux*: group of North American Indian tribes of the northern plains of the United States and adjacent Canada.
3. *ritual*: a ceremony or repeated practice often having religious significance
4. *reservation*: public land ceded to Native American peoples for them to maintain many of their cultural practices outside federal government regulations
5. *women's liberation movement*: political movement, begun in the 1960s to secure full equality for women in American society
6. *"acculturated"*: to be made to follow the customs of a dominant culture
7. *council*: assembly; meeting
8. *Joan of Arc*: French heroine who defeated the English at Orleans in 1429; later burned at the stake for witchcraft.
9. *herb*: a plant used to season food or for medicinal purposes
10. *Omaha*: any member of a tribe of Indians in northeastern Nebraska
11. *hooey*: nonsense
12. *squooshy*: unpleasantly soft and disagreeable
13. *to fend for ourselves*: to live independently
14. *gorging*: stuffing, filling to capacity
15. *moored*: docked, tied up at a pier
16. *tucked*: folded
17. *civet cat*: a meat-eating mammal slightly larger than a cat
18. *anticipated*: expected
19. *dejectedly*: in a depressed or unhappy condition
20. *audacity*: boldness

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Does your country or society have rituals comparable to Ta-Na-E-Ka? What is, or was, their purpose? Are they still practiced?*
2. *Grandfather says: "Endurance is the loftiest virtue of the Indian." Discuss this idea and apply it to people in general.*
3. *Are there legends in your country about "super-women" similar to that of the "Good Woman" legend of the Kaw Indians? Explain.*
4. *What is your reaction to the way that Mary participated in Ta-Na-E-Ka? In, your opinion, is it important to maintain traditional cultural practices?*

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During the Twelfth Summer of Elmer D. Peterson

⑭ THOMAS FOX AVERILL

Elmer Peterson feels unhappy and lonely when his family moves to an isolated farm in Kansas. However, his life changes abruptly when an old man asks his father to take care of his horse for a few days. Elmer's love for the horse inspires him to acts of independence and helps him to redefine his relationship with his parents.

Dedicated to Grant Henderson, Dover, Kansas

Elmer hated his name. He always had.

But now he hated it even more. He hated the farm his parents had moved him to. He hated the country. He hated not being able to ride his bike. He hated not having any friends.

Actually, since June first, he'd hated even being Elmer D. Peterson. June first was the day his father quit his electrician's job for good. That was the day they'd moved out into the middle of nowhere, Wabaunsee County, Kansas, for good. That was the day everything went bad. For good!

Now, there was nothing to do but help his parents. Out here, they didn't have cable TV. They didn't have people his age to run track with. They didn't even have a track near enough to run on regularly. They didn't have a good paved road near enough to ride his touring bicycle on. They didn't have anything but sky and grass and work.

"Rise and shine!" his father yelled up the attic stairs every morning.

"No way!" he shouted back.

His dad gave him time. So did his mom. It was the least they could do for a kid they'd named Elmer, and then ruined for life, moving him away from everything he'd ever known, including all the friends he'd just finished fifth grade with.

Time was moving slow. His dad was like a little kid, excited and happy. "There aren't enough hours in the day," his father said every night at the supper table. Elmer thought there were way too many hours in the day. He complained that there was nothing to do. "Explore," his mother said to him every morning. Elmer thought there was nothing to explore. He'd seen the fields, and the creek, and the woods, and all the outbuildings. There wasn't anything else. There would never be anything else. His life was completely and totally ruined.

Then, on July fourth, early in the morning, something happened. From his attic window, Elmer D. Peterson watched an old man with a crooked back lead a small, very thick horse down the gravel road toward his house. The two of them looked like a yoyo. The old man would hobble out ten feet, turn around, and then stand there jerking on the rope until the horse ran up to him, almost attacking him, circling him, and then stand very still, only his tail twitching. The old man would travel another ten feet and jerk so hard on the lead rope that Elmer's neck hurt just watching.

Elmer ignored his mother's call to breakfast. He wanted to see what would happen. He hoped the man was bringing the horse to them. He didn't know why the old man would, but still he hoped. And then, sure enough, horse and man turned into their lane. Elmer ran downstairs.

"Whoa,"[3] said his father. "What's got into you?"

But Elmer was halfway down the lane before his father caught up with him. The old man stood squinting at them, his eyes the same burnt umber[4] as the tobacco juice running down his stubbly chin.[5]

"Well," said the old man, "do me a favor. I can't keep this no good horse. He's busted the fence. You keep him until I can get it fixed."

Elmer approached the horse. Cockleburs[6] tangled its black mane. Elmer reached out to touch the horse's twitching withers.[7]

The old man suddenly jerked the little horse's head down. "Don't you even think about it, you piece of glue," he snarled. Elmer backed away. The old man looked at Elmer's dad. "Just over the holiday," he said. "Your boy here can feed him." The old man spat and looked at Elmer. "Would you like that, boy?"

"Sure," said Elmer. "Can we, Dad? Please?"

"No food," said Elmer's dad. "No equipment. No decent fence here."

"You got that little corral there, I ain't blind," said the old man. He pulled the little horse close to him. "A good critter, really. Part Shetland pony, part Morgan horse.[8] Was broke just as gentle as a rocking chair, once. Had all my grandbabies up on his back. No bit, just halter broke. We all get hard times, you know."

"All right," said Elmer's dad.

The old man went straight back through the old gate to the corral. He tied the thick little Morgan to a post, promised to return, and limped away down the road. Elmer's dad went inside. Elmer's mom called him for breakfast. He stayed with the horse as long as he could, but didn't want his mom mad at him.

"I'll feed and water him, and I'll even find an old comb and get the tangles out of his mane. I'll call him Tangler," Elmer said.

"Don't name him, Son," said Elmer's dad. "He's not yours."

"Just for while he's here. Just for a while. I'm calling him Tangler," Elmer insisted.

His father frowned. His mother sighed. But neither said a word.

Then they heard a terrific clatter from the corral. Elmer was the first to the kitchen door. Tangler was rearing back, arching away from the post, shaking his head and whinnying, his front hooves pawing the air. Then the rope snapped, and Tangler, tail extended, galloped in one quick circle around the corral and went straight for the gate. It was as tall as he was, but he sailed over it as if he'd sprouted wings. Elmer's father ran to the lane, but Tangler reached the road in a flurry of dust, turned in the direction he'd come, and literally high-tailed it out of there.

Elmer's dad picked up a rock and heaved it as far as he could. "Good riddance,"[9] he shouted.

"Don't," said Elmer's mother and went inside.

Elmer just stood in the doorway. He was sorry Tangler was gone. He was sorry his father didn't care. But he wasn't sorry he'd seen Tangler soar like an eagle over the fence, seen those powerful legs churn down the lane, seen that smooth gallop of freedom. Tangler was faster than Elmer had imagined any creature could be.

After breakfast, Elmer went to his room and found his old racing flats[10] in the back of the closet. He put them on and hurried down the stairs.

"Whoa," said his father. "Where are you going?"

"Scouting," Elmer said. Then, looking at his mother, he said "Exploring." He was out the door before either could call him back. He was running, faster than he remembered he could, down the lane, onto the road, and away. After Tangler.

Elmer didn't return until lunch. In all that time he saw Tangler only once. He came to the top of a rise, a place where he could see two miles in every direction. He stopped running. He put his hands on his thin hips and bent forward slightly, breathing deeply, catching his breath. If he hadn't been leaning forward, he wouldn't have seen the horse, surprisingly close to him, almost hidden in a clump of brush in a pasture.

Tangler saw him. The horse whinnied and trotted deeper into the brush that follows every draw[11] into a creek or pond. Elmer scooted under the fence, scraping his bare knees on a jagged shell of rock. He ran carefully cross-country into the brush and down the draw, but didn't see Tangler. He managed to fill his T-shirt with stick-tights[12] and other small seeds that take passage all through the long summer, hoping to find new homes in fresh soil.

At home, he filled a quart jar with water and drank it all before he said a word. "I know where Tangler is," he said finally.

"I don't care where he is," said Elmer's dad. "He's not our horse."

"We said we'd keep him," Elmer insisted. "We promised to feed him. You said I could take care of him."

"I'm not going to buy feed for a horse I've only seen for five minutes, Elmer. It just doesn't make sense."

"We can catch him."

"No," said Elmer's dad. He crossed his arms on his chest, something he did when he meant business.

Elmer sat down, frowning.

"We're going to the Andersons' at three," Elmer's dad reminded him.

"Not me," said Elmer. "I'm finding Tangler."

"You'll be ready at three o'clock, young man, or you'll never see that horse again."

"Yes, sir," said Elmer.

After lunch he went up to his room and looked out the attic window, first to the north, then to the south. As far as he could see all around him, miles of green hills, with their rock outcroppings,[13] the lines of trees revealing fence lines and other farms, the brown ribbons of road trailing off in the four directions; he could not see Tangler.

His mother sat on his bed.

"I wish I had a horse," Elmer said.

"Your father and I wish you did, too," she said.

"Then why can't I?"

"Elmer," she sighed. "We don't have the fences fixed. We don't have the time it would take to really care for a horse. We don't have a cent of extra money. You know we're taking a gamble even being out here. But it's very important to your father."

"He doesn't care about me. He only pays attention to what's important."

"You're important, Elmer. He's just worried. About money. About getting enough done before winter. He's just like you. He's doing things he's never done before. You know that's not easy."

"Can I go look for Tangler some more?"

"If you're back by three o'clock, sharp."

Elmer was tired of running. He put on long pants and walked slowly through fields in the direction he'd seen Tangler. Along the way he picked up stones to see how far he could hurl them. He followed their arc first with his eyes, then with his feet, hoping to find the exact same stones again. He never did. He had about as much chance of that as he did of seeing Tangler again.

Once, one of his rocks disturbed a red-tailed hawk. Elmer heard a scream, then saw the hawk slowly circle into the sky. He wished he could be up there, with a hawk's eyesight. He'd find Tangler for sure. He looked at his watch: two-fifteen. He'd have to run if he didn't want angry parents. He threw one more rock, high as he could. He watched it fall.

There was a picnic in town. A dark drive home. A deep sleep.

II

"Rise and shine!" his father called up the stairs. "We've got some errands to run."

Elmer was ready to pull the sheet over his head when he remembered the day before and Tangler. He threw on his clothes and hustled to the breakfast table.

"Wash your face and comb your tangles out," said his mother, patting his sleep-mussed hair.

"No time," said Elmer. "Me and Dad we've got to hurry."

"And where are you going?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he admitted He was full of hope for this day, but he wanted his dad to say what they'd do. "Dad?" he asked.

"First we're going to find that old man. I believe his name is Crawshaw. We're going to tell him we don't have his horse. We'll drive over so we can look on the way. Then we're going to buy some fencing supplies. Might be Elmer here wouldn't mind helping if there was a reason for him to."

"You mean I might get a horse?"

"Someday, Son," said his dad, "but you've got to be willing to do your part."

"Dear," said Elmer's mom, and she signalled Elmer's dad into their bedroom. They closed the door. It was one of their conferences. Usually, they just asked Elmer to go outside for a while. Even then he could sometimes hear loud voices, angry and sharp. Once he'd gone clear out past the corral to where a stand of trees began. But he still heard their voices, amazed by how far anger could travel.

This day, alone at the breakfast table, he overheard parts of what they said. His mother: "It's not fair unless you plan to." His father: "But we have to be ready first." Then, later: "He has to earn it." Then his mother again: "Don't get his hopes up if we can't do it soon." His father: something about "next spring." Then his mother making a warning and his father saying "spoiled." His mother: "You're not getting your way?"

Elmer looked at his cereal when his mother came back into the kitchen and poured herself more coffee. She leaned against the counter. "Good things sometimes take a long time to happen," she said.

Elmer nodded. When his father came out of the bedroom, Elmer left his cereal half-finished and followed silently, to the truck.

Elmer put his head out the window and searched the passing countryside for Tangler. Nothing. A mile away his father slowed at a broken-down gate. "That's where he's been," said Elmer's dad. "Been and gone. Look at that fence." As they drove along it, as the old barbed wire drooped, fell away broken from rusted staples. Posts, rotted in the ground, bent at every angle. "It'll take that old man more than a weekend to fix that," said Elmer's dad.

Elmer kept his eyes open. He saw everything else in the morning blue of sky, in the pale green of dusty grass, but not Tangler. And then they were finally at Crawshaw's.

The old man lived in an old shack of a house, as bent and crooked as he was, as brown with weather as the tobacco he chewed, as overgrown with weeds as his stubbly face.

"You knock on the door, Son," Elmer's dad joked. "If I do, it'll probably fall in."

But the old man was suddenly at the door. He opened the screen, leaned out, and spat some tobacco juice into a rusty milk can on the porch. Then he limped out and sat noisily on an old sofa. The cushions were ripped. Elmer imagined it was full of a hundred mice, squeaking like the sofa's tired springs. "So, he ran away already," said the old man, his brown eyes gleaming. "I should've figured it. Jump a fence, did he?"

Elmer nodded, but the old man wasn't looking at him. Crawshaw was looking far away, as though he were watching Tangler gallop in a circle and jump.

"He jumped the gate," said Elmer's dad.

"Sure. Whatever." The old man brushed his arms. "You've got a magical horse there," he said. He looked at Elmer. "He's little like the Shetland in him, but he's strong and powerful like his Morgan blood. And you listen here. That little horse can do anything, if he has a mind to. Used to be in the circus, you know. He can count, climb a stepladder up and down, jump anything in front or beside him. He can do anything, if he has a mind to. He can do everything but cook your breakfast. Why, he can run so fast in one of them little bitty circus rings you couldn't see but just a blur. One old boy told me he could get going so fast he'd disappear. That what he did to you, boy?" The man winked.

"Is Tangler really magical?" asked Elmer.

"Tangler?" asked the old man. "What do you mean, Tangler?"

"That's his name," said Elmer, excited. "I mean that's what I call him."

"Good name. He's tangled up my fence pretty good. You like him?"

"Sure," said Elmer He looked at his dad, but his dad was looking away.

"He's yours if you want him, boy," Crawshaw said suddenly.

Elmer couldn't believe it. "Mine?" he asked.

"He's yours if you can catch him."

"Can we catch him, Dad?" Elmer asked.

"I don't know," said his father. "How did you catch him?" he asked Crawshaw.

"Oh, he knows me. After I bought him off the circus he was like a pet. That was before my wife died. Before all my kids moved to town. I'd catch him now, 'cept this rheumatism's" got me so bad. I been laid up in the house ever since I was at your place yesterday."

"We'll think about it," said Elmer's dad. "Once we get our fence fixed."

Crawshaw threw his head back and laughed hard, his mouth open wide. His teeth were as black as rocks. He leaned forward. "You can't fence him in any more than you can fence in God's country air." He chuckled. "Get you some good feed and some sugar cubes. Treat him right. He'll come around. Especially to the boy here."

"We'll think about it," Elmer's dad said again, and he walked back toward the truck.

Elmer wondered if that meant no. These days, he couldn't quite tell what his dad was thinking, or just what his dad might do.

"Son," Crawshaw hissed and motioned Elmer over.

Elmer went and stood in front of the ratty[10] sofa, close enough to fill his nose with the strong smell of the old man.

"Here's what you do," said Crawshaw. "You got to use color. Remember, he was in the circus. He likes bright colors. Put food color on the sugar cubes. Get you something really bright to wear, like a clown costume. Oh, yeah, and if that doesn't work, there's one other thing. The little guy was raised on beer. He might still like a nip.[11] That might do it." He smiled.

"Thanks," said Elmer. He jumped off the creaky old porch and ran to the truck.

"Good luck," called Crawshaw.

"Will call you in a couple of days," Elmer's dad shouted back.

"No phone," yelled the old man through cupped hands. Elmer's dad just nodded and backed the truck out of the dirt drive. It was a quiet ride home. When they reached their turnoff, Elmer's dad kept right on going toward town.

"Where are we going?" asked Elmer.

"Where's your memory?" asked his dad.

"For fencing stuff?" Elmer asked, disappointed. "But he said that wouldn't matter. He said it wouldn't work. He told me how to catch Tangler."

"He told you a lot of things," said Elmer's dad. "And you believed it all. Magic. Circuses. Disappearing. Elmer, you listen to me. A horse is a horse, and if you want to keep a horse you have to build a good fence. And if you want this horse, you have to help me mend fence."

"But we've got to catch him. Soon," Elmer whined.

"We'll mend fence first, then try for the horse. And that's final. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Elmer. But he didn't want to wait very long. His horse would be wanting some sugar.

They went to town, came home, unloaded, began work. Mending fence was slow. It made the day stretch longer and longer, like the barbed wire when they winched[12] it at the corners. He didn't mean to, but Elmer kept pricking himself on the sharp barbs. "Pay attention," his dad would say. When Elmer put his fingers in his mouth, his dad told him to stop it.

His dad was hard to work with all through the long afternoon. They worked and worked, winched and winched, stretched and stretched, pounded and pounded the new staples into the old cedar posts. Elmer's dad pounded his thumb several times, each time letting out a big howl, the last time throwing his hammer. They searched the tall pasture grass for ten minutes before Elmer found it. "Thanks," said his dad, standing next to Elmer and looking back at the fence. Even with the new staples and wire, the posts sagged. Between some posts, the old wire drooped more than before. Elmer wondered if his dad wanted him to say something. He felt his dad's hand on his shoulder. "It's not easy to do brand new things, is it?" Elmer's dad asked.

"No, sir," said Elmer and moved back to the fence. Tangler could jump it no problem no matter how well it was mended.

They strung two new wires before his dad let Elmer go back to the house. He was supposed to tell his mom they were done for the day, but when he walked by the back porch he saw her in a lawn chair, reading a book. He waved and hurried inside. He had work to do and fast. He ran to the kitchen with a chair and went for the top cabinet, where his mom kept the baking supplies.

The food coloring was right where he'd guessed, and he slipped the tiny red, blue, green, and yellow bottles into his back pockets. But the sugar cubes were not there. Surely they weren't all gone. He racked his brain,[13] then remembered. One of the women his mother taught with had come to tea the month before. His mother had put the cubes into a little bowl, part of her best china set. He jumped off the chair and went to the china cupboard.

He'd just dug out a handful when he heard his mother open the back door. He slipped them in his shirt pocket, then put the lid on the bowl. "What are you doing?" asked his mom.

"I'm...I thought I'd set the table for you. Dad says we're done for the day."

"With my best china?" His mother smiled. Elmer could tell she knew he was up to something, but didn't want to challenge him.

"Well," he said, "it's kind of a special occasion. Since Mr. Crawshaw gave me Tangler."

"Elmer," said his mother, "you've still got to mend the fence and then see if you can catch him. Your father thinks Mr. Crawshaw is just getting your hopes up. Don't get your heart too set, okay?"

"Okay," Elmer said. He stood up. His front shirt pocket bulged out, and he ran upstairs to unload the cubes. From his room he called down to her: "I'll come help you set the table in a second!"

"Thanks!" she yelled back.

At supper, his mom asked his dad how it was going with the fence.

"Okay," his dad said.

Elmer heard something in his dad's voice, but he couldn't tell what it was until his mom asked him the same question, and, just like his dad he said, "Okay." The way they said it was exactly the same, like it wasn't really going okay. Usually his dad said things like he knew just what he thought and just what to do. That's what he'd always been like. But now there was something new in his dad's voice. Like doubt. Elmer liked that a little, but it scared him a little, too.

"Can I go outside?" he asked, when he'd finished everything but the green beans on his plate.

"Where to?" asked his dad.

"Just out," Elmer said. "Maybe take a long walk, then run home. Maybe my new school will have a cross-country team."

"Are you going horse-hunting?" asked his dad. Elmer nodded. His father looked at the big kitchen clock. It was an old school clock Elmer's mom had brought home when the school where she taught had bought new ones. It always reminded Elmer of how he watched the clock at school, waiting for the days to end. "You can go for a while. Be home by eight sharp." His father sounded definite again.

Elmer bounded up the stairs to put on his running shoes. Then he found his school backpack. In it, he stuffed an old white shirt, some red pants he'd worn once in a school play, and a bright red hunting cap his dad had wanted to throw away. In the pack's zipper front, he slipped the sugar cubes and food coloring he'd snitched before dinner. Then, he hurried down the stairs and ran past the kitchen.

"What's in the pack?" he heard his mother ask.

"Just some stuff," he said, still running. He didn't hear his mother call him back, so he headed quickly away toward the corral. He remembered seeing a big piece of rope hanging in one of the outbuildings. He creaked open the old door and there it was. He took it down. It was only about twelve feet long and old and frayed, stiff and rough like Tangler's mane. But it was all he had, so he stuffed it in his pack, put the pack on his back, and took off at a slow jog.

An hour later, he was at Crawshaw's dirt drive, five miles from his house. He had a side stitch[19] from running right after dinner, but he didn't care. He walked toward the house. The sun, lowering in the western sky, turned the horizon pale, then washed it lavender. Elmer was looking at the sky when he heard Crawshaw boom out: "Caught him yet, boy?"

"No," said Elmer, still breathing hard as he walked up to the porch.

"That tired and you ain't even started?"

Elmer sat on the edge of the porch. "I ran over here. I can't get any beer. My mom and dad never have any."

"So you thought I just might?" Crawshaw chuckled. "You might be right." Elmer looked at the old man, who spat a stream of tobacco juice, perfectly, into the milk can six feet from him. "And you might be wrong. You haven't tried the sugar and the colors, have you?"

Elmer was uncomfortable. He hoped Crawshaw would help him, but it was just questions, just like being at home. So he stood up and took off his backpack.

"You think I'll be able to catch him?" Elmer asked, pulling out the old rope.

"Wait a minute, son," said the old man. "You go near him with that rope he'll be halfway to Timbuktu[20] before you can say Jack Robinson."[21]

"But you brought him to our place with a rope."

"And how well did that work?" asked the old man.

"Not very, I guess," admitted Elmer.

"But he couldn't have stayed at all without it," Crawshaw said. "And I wanted him to stay. I ain't got no time for him anymore. Seems to me like you might. Once you catch him, that is. Once you get him used to you. But you can't do it with a rope."

Elmer dropped the rope and began emptying the rest of his pack. "Good," said the old man when he showed him the pants and shirt and hat. "Great," he said when Elmer showed him the food coloring and the sugar cubes.

"How'd you know I wanted a horse?" Elmer asked.

"You know a boy who don't? Now you get those cubes colored. Get your clothes on. It's getting late."

Elmer looked at his watch: six-thirty. He opened the bottles of food coloring and watched the drops of liquid soak into the cubes. He colored each cube. He made one of all the colors, different color on each side. Then he laid the white shirt onto the porch and made long stripes of colors top to bottom like a rainbow of suspenders. He let the shirt dry while he put on the bright red pants over his jogging shorts. "Good," said the old man, when Elmer finally put the shirt and bright hunting cap on, completing his costume. "Now, skedaddle. If you don't see him tonight, we'll think about the beer tomorrow. Can you get away?"

"I will," Elmer promised. "I think Dad'll let me. But I don't think he likes Tangler. He doesn't believe what you said about circuses and all."

"What about you? Do you believe it, boy?" asked Crawshaw.

"Yes," said Elmer. He turned away, then back around. "Thanks, Mr. Crawshaw," he said. "Thanks a lot."

"Call me by my first name," said the old man, "if we're going to be friends."

"What is your first name?" Elmer asked.

"You know it, I bet," said Crawshaw. "Guess."

"I don't know."

"Elmer," said the old man.

"What?" asked Elmer.

Crawshaw just laughed. "Elmer Crawshaw. That's my name."

"Really?" asked Elmer. "That's my name, too."

"Elmer Crawshaw?" joked the old man.

"No. Elmer D. Peterson."

"Well, I'm mighty pleased to meet you, Elmer," said Elmer. "It ain't every day you find another Elmer, is it?"

"No, sir."

"Elmer."

"Right. No, sir, Elmer."

"Now get that horse, boy." Elmer Crawshaw shooed Elmer D. Peterson away.

At first, Elmer felt weird running in the long red pants, the funny shirt and hat, the sugar cubes crunching in his hands like decaying dice. But he wanted to find Tangler, and he ran a mile, fast, before he ducked under a fence and started through some pasture near where he remembered seeing Tangler the day before. He tried to stay in the high places, where Tangler could see him and be attracted to the colors. He trotted into the dusk, feeling good about Elmer Crawshaw, that anyone in the world would have the same first name as he did. The old man had known he wanted a horse. Elmer Crawshaw wanted him to catch Tangler. He would help. He would be a friend.

Elmer heard a whinnying and stopped. He turned full circle, but saw nothing. Then he heard it again, behind him. He saw Tangler come out of a draw, and Elmer danced, waving his arms like a clown might. Then he held out a handful of sugar cubes. "Come here, boy," he called. "Come here." And Tangler came. Elmer couldn't believe it.

Ten feet away, Tangler stopped, thrust his neck out, his nose forward, and sniffed. Elmer extended his arm as far as he could without taking a step. Tangler stretched forward, too, then took several small steps. Elmer tiptoed closer, until, finally, Tangler brushed Elmer's extended palm. He snuffed through the nose, then his tongue came out, singled out a cube of many colors, and brought it into his mouth. Tangler crunched the cube. "Good boy," said Elmer. "Good boy."

He didn't know what to do next, but he knew it was late, and he knew he'd have to use the few other colored sugar cubes to lead Tangler home. So he did what he didn't want to do. He turned and walked away toward his house. In twenty feet he looked back. Tangler was following him. Elmer stopped and fed the horse another cube. Then he walked some more. Two cubes later they were at the fence. Elmer took a chance. He slid under and stood on the road holding out a cube of sugar. Tangler neared the fence, looked over it, whinnied, and promptly jumped it. Elmer couldn't believe his eyes. He gave Tangler another cube, his next to last one, then ran down the road, Tangler following along behind.

A half-mile from his house, Elmer fed Tangler his last cube. He began trotting again. It was getting very late, already well after eight o'clock. He'd be in big trouble if he didn't get home soon. He heard Tangler behind him and ran faster.

Then he couldn't hear anything but his own footfalls. He stopped and turned around. He couldn't see anything but lumpy shadows on the distant road. "Tangler!" he called. Nothing answered. He stood quietly, disappointed.

"Elmer!" It was his father's voice. He took out running toward it. Right as he neared his lane, he thought he heard something. He stopped one last time. That's when he saw it. A shadow galloped toward him. Hooves sounded the gravel like hollow bones. Tangler was coming right at him, and Elmer froze. He wanted to close his eyes, but he wanted to see what Tangler would do. Elmer squeezed his hands together as hard as he could. His face winced. Tangler thundered right up to high, then leaped, clearing Elmer's head with a rush of wind. The horse landed without breaking stride, leaving behind only the leathery smell of his hide. Tangler raced away, down the road.

"Elmer!" his father shouted again.

"Coming," Elmer said. He quickly stripped off his clown costume and stuffed it back in his pack. Then he ran up the lane, his breath still short with excitement. He explained everything to his dad, but he was very late. His father claimed he hadn't heard the horse run up and jump over Elmer. His father was mad and grounded him for the rest of the week.

III

Elmer woke to the sound of his father's boots on the attic stairs.

"You can work with me, or you can stay inside. That's it." His dad was still mad.

"Inside," Elmer said. Then, "I really did see him. He really did follow me home and eat sugar cubes out of my hand. He really did jump over me."

"Elmer," said his dad. "I want to believe you. But I also have to punish you for staying out way past when I told you to be in."

"It was like a job, Dad," Elmer said. "I just wanted to finish it. You come in late to dinner sometimes when you have to finish something."

"And you can, too, when you're an adult." His father looked at him, but Elmer turned away. "Your mother's gone to town. But she'll be back by lunch. You help her around the house today. You understand?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Mend fence, of course. First things first, Elmer."

"He can jump it, anyway."

"We'll see." His father went back down the stairs. Just before he went outside he stuck his head into the stairwell. "You just keep from getting sassy. You understand? You don't know everything."

Neither do you, Elmer thought. He wanted his dad to believe him, to understand. "Yes, sir," was all he said. He went to the window and watched his father walk through the gate, past the corral, toward the back pasture.

As soon as he couldn't see his dad anymore, he hurried to his closet. He had made up his mind the night before, when his dad didn't believe his story. He would sneak out, run to Crawshaw's shack, pick up the beer, and get Tangler to come with him.

Off he ran, pack on his back. This time, he found a shortcut through different pastures, to the old man's house. "Morning, Elmer," said Crawshaw from the sofa on the porch.

"Morning, Elmer," Elmer said back. He sat down on the edge of the porch and told his friend all about the night before.

"Atta boy," said Crawshaw when he heard Elmer's story. "Sounds like he likes you."

"I don't have any more sugar cubes."

"That's okay. 'Cause I found a bottle of beer. Now get on your costume. He'll be somewhere between here and your place, if I know him."

Elmer threw on his clothes, emptying the backpack. Crawshaw reached behind the sofa, then stood up, twisting the top off a brown bottle of Budweiser. He also had several old sponges, brownish purple like big pieces of liver. He picked up Elmer's pack, stuffed it full of sponges, and poured in the whole bottle of beer. A little foam came to the top, but Crawshaw zipped it shut.

"Well," he said, throwing the empty bottle at a fifty-five gallon drum he used for trash, "now he'll follow you anywhere, once he gets a whiff."

"Thanks," said Elmer. He put on the pack. It leaked a little onto his shirt and pants. "I'm not supposed to be out today."

"You get in trouble last night?" Crawshaw didn't wait for an answer. "Tell me, do you have any tack?" Elmer looked puzzled. "Bridle. Saddle. Halter. Stuff like that," Crawshaw explained.

"No, sir."

"Well, get going," Crawshaw said. "You get that horse home. Good luck."

"Thanks, Elmer," said Elmer, and he ran off. He could feel the beer in his pack slosh around. His pants were getting soaked. The warm beer smelled a little like bread dough and a little like rotting apples.

Elmer tried to go in a straight line between Crawshaw's house and his. He ran across country he'd never seen before, and everywhere he looked, he saw new things: the way the trees bent from the steady winds, the way the grass turned blue along its edges, the way the ponds reflected the sky. Maybe it was because he was grounded and wasn't supposed to be out. Maybe it was because since Tangler he'd been exploring the countryside so much.

Maybe it was because he wanted to see Tangler in each new view, so he looked close. But he loved being out in the beautiful countryside, nothing but grass beneath him, sky over him, and the whispering wind pushing and pulling him along. He wished he never had to go home.

He went down a draw, crossed a dried up old creek bed, and began climbing up a rise. A little way up he jumped over a thin wire. He hadn't seen anything like it before, but he was pretty sure it was electrified. He almost touched it, then decided he'd better not. Near the top of the rise, he stopped and looked all around him. He saw three things at once. Above him, farther up the rise, he saw a huge cow, black and stocky, thick in the shoulders and neck. Its eyes glinted in the sun. Just as Elmer realized it was not a cow, but a bull, he saw Tangler, behind the animal, past another thin wire and another fence line. Then, to his right, he saw a plume of dust raising from the gravel road. A truck, his father's truck, came over the rise.

Elmer stood very still. There was no use running. Either his father would see him in the crazy clown costume, or he wouldn't. But before he could tell anything about his dad, Elmer heard a huge bellow. The great black bull tossed its head. Then it pawed the ground and bellowed again. Elmer changed his mind about running. He tried to judge which fence line in the treeless pasture was closest. The bull lowered its massive head.

Then Tangler whinnied. The bull looked behind him, distracted for a second by Tangler. Elmer took advantage of the moment, running toward the road, away from the bull and away from Tangler. That's when he saw his father's truck stop. He was running straight for it, his legs pumping, the beer on his back churning to foam.

Even as he ran, Elmer thought of all the trouble he was in. For just a moment, he felt mad. Mad at the bull, mad at his dad, mad at Elmer Crawshaw, mad at Tangler. He wondered why all this had to happen to him, Elmer D. Peterson. Then he couldn't think anymore, because he could hear the bull's heavy footsteps. He looked back, over his shoulder, still running, and everything seemed slow motion. The bull was lumbering toward him. Tangler whinnied, reared back, shook his head. "Tangler!" Elmer shouted. Then, because he wasn't watching where he was going, he tripped on a clump of bluestem and went down flat on his face.

"Elmer!" his dad yelled. Elmer looked up.

"Dad!" he screamed back. His father began to climb the fence.

Then Elmer heard a loud whinnying, almost a whine, and he sat up. Tangler jumped the fence and raced toward the bull, which was halfway to where Elmer sat. Elmer stood up, but he couldn't run. Like the night before, he could only watch what Tangler would do. He was afraid, but fascinated. Tangler galloped across the pasture, gaining on the bull.

"Elmer! Run, Elmer!" his dad yelled again, over the fence now and looking for something to throw at the bull.

But Elmer couldn't move. He was frozen to the spot.

"Elmer!" It was his mother's voice this time. Elmer hadn't seen her in the truck with his dad. He waved to her, just as if everything was fine, just as if there were no bull running toward him, just as if he didn't have on a silly clown costume, just as if he didn't have a backpack full of beer-soaked sponges leaking all over him.

He could feel the earth shaking with the pounding of the bull's hooves. He looked right at the bull, now. It was huge. Tangler was just behind it, though, tail up, galloping faster than Elmer had ever seen him run. And then, when the bull was just thirty feet from Elmer, Tangler caught up to the charging animal. Elmer couldn't see what happened, but suddenly the bull crumpled onto its front legs, bellowing. The bull looked all around. Tangler danced away, distracting the bull from Elmer. There was something in Tangler's mouth. Elmer felt a hand on his shoulder, tugging at him. It was his dad.

"Look," said Elmer, pointing. They both looked, amazed. Tangler had bitten the bull's tail clear off, and he tossed it in his mouth like a whip. The bull stood back up then and stared at Elmer and his dad. It stared at Tangler. It let out a huge bellow, then started after the horse. Tangler galloped away, turning a circle, confusing the bull.

"C'mon," Elmer's dad said, and he and Elmer backed away, their eyes on the bull and Tangler. They hopped the electric wire, then climbed the fence, all the time watching Tangler run the bull. Elmer's mother came over and stood beside them. Tangler was amazing, running in circles, turning the bull every which way. Once, when the bull charged him, Tangler made a tight circle and jumped right over the enraged animal. Elmer couldn't believe how fast, how nimble Tangler was, his nostrils flaring, the bull's tail still whipping from his teeth. Finally, after five minutes of bull baiting, Tangler had the huge animal so tired, so dizzy, so confused, that it crumpled again onto the grass, its head lazily following Tangler's movements as though it were drunk.

"Greatest show on earth, ain't it?" Elmer Crawshaw walked up behind them. He had parked his truck down the road a ways earlier when they were all too busy and anxious to notice him. Crawshaw lifted the pack off Elmer's back. "Thanks for helping me, son," he said. He began walking away with the pack. When he neared his truck, he turned around and yelled back at them. "I know I shouldn't have told you to come over. But I couldn't have done it without you. I've got your pay in my truck there." He walked toward his pickup, and threw Elmer's pack into the back. Elmer and his mother and father followed the old man.

Then Tangler whinnied, and, free from the bull, he trotted toward the road. He jumped the little electric wire, then jumped the fenceline thirty feet from them. He started toward them, but halfway, as if remembering something, Tangler trotted up to the fence and with a shake of his head he tossed the bull's tail into the pasture. Then he turned and trotted toward them, his nostrils still flared. Before they could wonder what he'd do next, he passed them and jumped up into Crawshaw's pick-up, just like a dog would do. Elmer and his dad and mom hurried to the truck.

Tangler was nuzzling Elmer's pack. Crawshaw reached in, unzipped it for him, and Tangler nuzzled in and pulled a sponge out with his teeth. They could hear him sucking up the beer.

"Elmer," said Crawshaw. "You ride in the back with Tangler, here. You can inspect the tack. It's your payment for helping. Peterson, you can ride up with me. The missus can drive your truck home." Crawshaw spoke with quick authority. Elmer's dad nodded. So did his mom. It was like a dream that couldn't be happening. Elmer jumped up next to Tangler and pulled another sponge from the pack. He petted Tangler and put his face in the horse's strong neck.

Then they started out, toward home, Elmer Crawshaw and Elmer's dad in the truck cab. Elmer D. Peterson and Tangler, along with a bridle, saddle, halter, and lead ropes, were the cargo. Elmer's mom followed a distance behind, giving their dust time to blow away. Elmer waved at her once, and she waved back, smiling and shaking her head.

He didn't know what kind of trouble he was in. Maybe pretty bad. He saw Crawshaw and his dad talking. They didn't seem to be mad, but he didn't know what his dad might be thinking. Still, all the way home all he could think about was Tangler. He was right next to the horse. His horse. Tangler liked him. Tangler would get used to him. No matter what happened to him, he knew he'd have a friend. Two friends, because there was Elmer Crawshaw, too. He thought about that all the way home. He realized he might as well feel good about his life for as long as he could.

When Crawshaw turned into their lane, Elmer's spirits sank. Crawshaw stopped his truck near the corral gate. Elmer saw Crawshaw say one more thing to his dad; then the two men climbed out. Elmer's mom pulled up nearby. Elmer grabbed another sponge out of his pack for Tangler. Then he waited for his dad to say something. They all gathered around the truck.

Finally, Elmer's dad cleared his throat. "Son," he said, "I guess he's yours. You caught him, just like the man said. Or maybe he caught you. He's one heck of a horse."

"The greatest ever," said Elmer. He didn't know whether he should say "I'm sorry" or "Thank you." He just stood next to Tangler, his clown costume itching like crazy.

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *Wabaunsee County, Kansas*: a farming region West of Topeka, Kansas
2. *outbuildings*: farm buildings, i.e., stable, sheds, barn, etc.
3. Whoa: Stop. A command a person might give to a horse
4. *umber*: a yellowish brown color
5. *stubby chin*: whiskers were growing on his chin
6. *cockleburs*: stickers from plants
7. *withers*: the ridge between the shoulder bones of a horse
8. *Part Shetland pony, part Morgan horse*: The Shetland pony is a small stocky breed that originated in the Shetland islands. The Morgan is a lightweight, strong horse that originated in Vermont.
9. *Good riddance*: (Said in disgust and in relief) It is good to be rid of this problem
10. *racing flats*: shoes that lack a heel
11. *the draw*: a shallow gully
12. *stick-tights*: stickers from weeds
13. *rock outcroppings*: rock protruding from the soil
14. *rheumatism*: a chronic condition of painful muscles or joints
15. *rack one's brain*: to try to remember something
16. *ratty*: shabby, old
17. *nip*: a short, quick drink of alcohol
18. *winched*: fastened together
19. *a side stitch*: a pain in one's side (often resulting from running)
20. *halfway to Timbuktu*: halfway around the world
21. *before you can say Jack Robinson*: (cliche) very quickly; almost immediately
22. *skeedaddle*= Skedaddle: go quickly
23. *ducked*: lowered one's head or body
24. *whinnying*: the sound made by a horse
25. *grounded*: confined to one's home or quarters
26. *Atta boy*= That-a-boy: That's the way to do it!
27. *get a whiff*: inhale the smell
28. *plume of dust raising*: dust rose up like a feather
29. *lumbering*: moving heavily
30. *nimble*: graceful; agile
31. *bull baiting*: teasing the bull to make him angry
32. *nuzzling*: touching with one's nose
33. *the tack*: harness equipment
34. *missus*: reference to Mrs. Peterson

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What did moving to Wabaunsee County, Kansas mean for Elmer? For his father? For his mother?*
2. *What did Mr. and Mrs. Peterson do to help Elmer adjust to his new home? How would you describe them as parents—understanding, strict, negligent? Explain.*
3. *Why wasn't Mr. Crawshaw more upset when he learned that his horse had run away from the Petersons?*
4. *Was Tangler a magical horse like Mr. Crawshaw said? Did he perform any feats of magic?*
5. *How did Tangler help Elmer redefine his relationship with his father and mother?*

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The Use of Force

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WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

In this story, the narrator is a family doctor who is trying to help a little girl who is seriously ill. The frightened, defensive child resists his attempts to examine her and unleashes in him feelings of anger and pride not in keeping with his profession.

They were new patients to me; all I had was the name, Olson.

"Please come down as soon as you can; my daughter is very sick."

When I arrived, I was met by the mother, a big startled-looking woman, very clean and apologetic, who merely said, "Is this the doctor?" and let me in. "In the back," she added. "You must excuse us, doctor; we have her ㉗ in the kitchen where it is warm. It is very damp here sometimes."

The child was fully dressed and sitting on her father's lap near the kitchen table. He tried to get up, but I motioned for him not to bother, took off my overcoat, and started to look things over. I could see that they were all very nervous, eyeing me up and down distrustfully. As often, in such cases, they weren't telling me more than they had to; it was up to me to tell them; that's why they were spending three dollars on me.

The child was fairly eating me up with her cold, steady eyes,[1] and no expression to her face whatever. She did not move and seemed, inwardly, quiet; an unusually attractive little thing, and as strong as a heifer[2] in appearance. But her face was flushed, she was breathing rapidly, and I realized that she had a high fever. She had magnificent blonde hair, in profusion.[3] One of those picture children often reproduced in advertising leaflets and the photogravure[4] sections of the Sunday papers.

"She's had a fever for three days," began the father, "and we don't know what it comes from. My wife has given her things, you know, like people do, but it don't do no good. And there's been a lot of sickness around. So we tho't[5] you'd better look her over and tell us what is the matter."

As doctors often do, I took a trial shot[6] at it as a point of departure. "Has she had a sore throat?"

Both parents answered me together, "No.... No, she says her throat don't hurt her."

"Does your throat hurt you?" added the mother to the child. But the little girl's expression didn't change, nor did she move her eyes from my face.

"Have you looked?"

"I tried to," said the mother, "but I couldn't see."

As it happens, we had been having a number of cases of diphtheria[8] in the school to which this child went during that month, and we were all, quite apparently, thinking of that, though no one had as yet spoken of the thing.

"Well," I said, "suppose we take a look at the throat first." I smiled in my best professional manner, and asking for the child's first name I said, "Come on, Mathilda, open your mouth and let's take a look at your throat."

Nothing doing.[9]

"Aw, come on," I coaxed, "just open your mouth wide and let me take a look. Look," I said, opening both hands wide, "I haven't anything in my hands. Just open up and let me see."

"Such a nice man," put in the mother. "Look how kind he is to you. Come on, do what he tells you. He won't hurt you."

At that I ground my teeth[10] in disgust. If only they wouldn't use the word "hurt," I might be able to get somewhere. But I did not allow myself to be hurried or disturbed, but speaking quietly and slowly I approached the child again.

As I moved my chair a little nearer, suddenly, with one catlike movement, both her hands clawed instinctively for my eyes and she almost reached them too. In fact she knocked my glasses flying and they fell, though unbroken, several feet away from me on the kitchen floor.

Both the mother and father almost turned themselves inside out[11] in embarrassment and apology. "You bad girl," said the mother, taking her and shaking her by one arm. "Look what you've done. The nice man...."

"For heaven's sake," I broke in. "Don't call me a nice man to her. I'm here to look at her throat on the chance that she might have diphtheria and possibly die of it. But that's nothing to her. Look here," I said to the child, "we're going to look at your throat. You're old enough to understand what I'm saying. Will you open it now by yourself, or shall we have to open it for you?"

Not a move. Even her expression hadn't changed. Her breaths, however, were coming faster and faster. Then the battle began. I had to do it. I had to have a throat culture[12] for her own protection. But first I told the parents that it was entirely up to them. I explained the danger but said that I would not insist on a throat examination so long as they would take the responsibility.

"If you don't do what the doctor says, you'll have to go to the hospital," the mother admonished[13] her severely.

Oh yeah? I had to smile to myself. After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat;[14] the parents were contemptible[15] to me. In the ensuing struggle they grew more and more abject,[16] crushed, exhausted, while she surely rose to magnificent heights of insane fury of effort bred of her terror of me.

The father tried his best, and he was a big man, but the fact that she was his daughter, his shame at her behavior, and his dread of hurting her made him release her just at the critical times when I had almost achieved success, till I wanted to kill him. But his dread also that she might have diphtheria made him tell me to go on, go on, though he himself was almost fainting, while the mother moved back and forth behind us, raising and lowering her hands in an agony of apprehension.[17]

"Put her in front of you on your lap," I ordered, "and hold both her wrists."

But as soon as he did, the child let out a scream. "Don't, you're hurting me. Let go of my hands. Let them go, I tell you." Then she shrieked terrifyingly, hysterically. "Stop it! Stop it! You're killing me!"

"Do you think she can stand it, doctor?" said the mother.

"You get out," said the husband to his wife. "Do you want her to die of diphtheria?"

"Come on, now, hold her," I said.

Then I grasped the child's head with my left hand and tried to get the wooden tongue depressor between her teeth. She fought, with clenched teeth, desperately! But now I also had grown furious—at a child. I tried to hold myself down but I couldn't. I know how to expose a throat for inspection. And I did my best. When finally I got the wooden spatula[18] behind the last teeth and just the point of it into the mouth cavity, she opened up for an instant, but before I could see anything, she came down again, and gripping the wooden blade between her molars,[19] she reduced it to splinters before I could get it out again.

"Aren't you ashamed," the mother yelled at her. "Aren't you ashamed to act like that in front of the doctor?"

"Get me a smooth-handled spoon of some sort," I told the mother. "We're going through with this. The child's mouth was already bleeding. Her tongue was cut and she was screaming in wild hysterical shrieks. Perhaps I should have desisted[20] and come back in an hour or more. No doubt it would have been better. But I have seen at least two children lying dead in bed of neglect in such cases, and feeling that I must get a diagnosis now or never, I went at it again. But the worst of it was that I too had got beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it.

The damned little brat must be protected against her own idiocy, one says to one's self at such times. Others must be protected against her. It is a social necessity. And all these things are true. But a blind fury, a feeling of adult shame, bred of a longing for muscular release, are the operatives.[21] One goes on to the end.

In a final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child's neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth and down her throat till she gagged.[22] And there it was—both tonsils covered with membrane.[23] She had fought valiantly[24] to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents in order to escape just such an outcome as this.

Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before, but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *(to) eat someone up with (their) eyes:* devour with a searching gaze; examine earnestly with the eyes
2. *heifer:* a young cow
3. *profusion:* abundance; great amount
4. *photogravure:* photographic section of the newspaper showing photos of people in the news
5. *tho't* = thought
6. *trial shot:* a test or tryout; an experiment to see how something works
7. *point of departure:* a beginning; a starting point from which to approach a subject
8. *diphtheria:* a contagious disease attacking the throat, often fatal
9. *Nothing doing:* an expression indicating that something didn't or won't work; the result is negative; nothing happened or will happen
10. *to grind one's teeth:* to press or rub the teeth together, usually in anger or desperation
11. *turned themselves inside out:* showed great embarrassment
12. *throat culture:* a sample or specimen of germs in a throat
13. *(to) admonish:* advise; caution; warn against something
14. *brat:* a rude, impolite child
15. *contemptible:* unworthy; detestable; revolting
16. *abject:* lacking in courage; spiritless; miserable
17. *apprehension:* worry, distress, nervousness; fear
18. *wooden spatula:* a flat spoon made from wood
19. *molars:* the cheek or side teeth of a human being
20. *(to) desist:* discontinue; stop; leave off
21. *operatives:* the forces that influence behavior; the motivating forces
22. *(to) gag:* choke; have an impulse to vomit
23. *membrane:* a thin covering of skin; tissue covering the inside of the throat, nose, etc.
24. *valiantly:* fearlessly; bravely

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Why was the doctor called?*
2. *What is your impression of the doctor? Explain.*
3. *How would you describe the child and her parents?*
4. *Can you describe some of the feelings that the doctor had during this visit? (What are some of the thoughts that went through his mind?)*
5. *Why do you think the child didn't want the doctor to look at her throat?*

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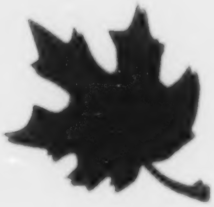
Two Kinds

AMY TAN

In this story, Jing Mei Woo, a Chinese American woman, recalls the conflicts she had with her mother when she was a child. Only after many years had passed and the mother had died does Jing Mei Woo realize that her mother's dreams were an expression of her love for her.



My mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get a good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous. ㉛

"Of course you can be prodigy, too," my mother told me when I was nine. "You can be best anything. What does Auntie Lindo know? Her daughter, she is only best tricky."

America was where all my mother's hope lay. She had come here in 1949 after losing everything in China; her mother and father, her family home, her first husband, and two daughters, twin baby girls. But she never looked back with regret. There were so many ways for things to get better.

We didn't immediately pick the right kind of prodigy. At first my mother thought I could be a Chinese Shirley Temple. We'd watch Shirley's old movies on TV as though they were training films. My mother would poke my arm and say, "Ni kan"—You watch. And I would see Shirley tapping her feet, or singing a sailor song, or pursing her lips into a very round O while saying, "Oh my goodness."

"Ni kan," said my mother as Shirley's eyes flooded with tears. "You already know how. Don't need talent for crying!"

Soon after my mother got this idea about Shirley Temple, she took me to a beauty training school in the Mission district and put me in the hands of a student who could barely hold the scissors without shaking. Instead of getting big fat curls, I emerged with an uneven mass of crinkly black fuzz. My mother dragged me off to the bathroom and tried to wet down my hair.

"You look like Negro Chinese," she lamented, as if I had done this on purpose.

The instructor of the beauty training school had to lop off these soggy clumps to make my hair even again. "Peter Pan" is very popular these days," the instructor assured my mother. I now had hair the length of a boy's, with straight-across bangs that hung as a slant, two inches above my eyebrows. I liked the haircut and it made me actually look forward to my future fame.

In fact, in the beginning, I was just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so. I pictured this prodigy part of me as many different images, trying each one on for size. I was a dainty ballerina girl standing by the curtains, waiting to hear the right music that would send me floating on my tiptoes. I was like the Christ child lifted out of the straw manger, crying with holy indignity. I was Cinderella stepping from her pumpkin carriage with sparkly cartoon music filling the air.

In all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become perfect. My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach. I would never feel the need to sulk for anything.

But sometimes the prodigy in me became impatient. "If you don't hurry up and get me out of here, I'm disappearing for good," it warned. "And then you'll always be nothing."

Every night after dinner, my mother and I would sit at the Formica kitchen table. She would present new tests, taking her examples from stories of amazing children she had read in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, or *Good Housekeeping*, *Reader's Digest*, and a dozen other magazines from people whose houses she cleaned. And since she cleaned many houses each week, we had a great assortment. She would look through them all, searching for stories about remarkable children.

The first night she brought out a story about a three-year-old boy who knew the capitals of all the states and even most of the European countries. A teacher was quoted as saying the little boy could also pronounce the names of the foreign cities correctly.

"What's the capital of Finland?" my mother asked me, looking at the magazine story.

All I knew was the capital of California, because Sacramento was the name of the street we lived on in Chinatown. "Nairobi!" I guessed, saying the most foreign word I could think of. She checked to see if that was possibly one way to pronounce "Helsinki" before showing me the answer.

The tests got harder—multiplying numbers in my head, finding the queen of hearts in a deck of cards, trying to stand on my head without using my hands, predicting the daily temperatures in Los Angeles, New York, and London.

One night I had to look at a page from the Bible for three minutes and then report everything I could remember. "Now Jehoshaphat had riches and honor in abundance and...that's all I remember, Ma," I said.

And after seeing my mother's disappointed face once again, something inside of me began to die. I hated the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations. Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back—and that it would always be this ordinary face—I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror.

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me—because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather thoughts filled with lots of won'ts. I won't let her change me, I promised myself. I won't be what I'm not.

So now on nights when my mother presented her tests, I performed listlessly, my head propped on one arm. I pretended to be bored. And I was. I got so bored I started counting the bellows of the foghorns out on the bay while my mother drilled me in other areas. The sound was comforting and reminded me of the cow jumping over the moon. And the next day, I played a game with myself, seeing if my mother would give up on me before eight bellows. After a while I usually counted only one, maybe two bellows at most. At last she was beginning to give up hope.

* * *

Two or three months had gone by without any mention of my being a prodigy again. And then one day my mother was watching The Ed Sullivan Show on TV. The TV was old and the sound kept shorting out. Every time my mother got halfway up from the sofa to adjust the set, the sound would go back on and Ed would be talking. As soon as she sat down, Ed would go silent again. She got up, the TV broke into loud piano music. She sat down. Silence. Up and down, back and forth, quiet and loud. It was like a stiff embraceless dance between her and the TV set. Finally she stood by the set with her hand on the sound dial.

She seemed entranced by the music, a little frenzied[9] piano piece with this mesmerizing[10] quality, sort of quick passages and then teasing lilting[11] ones before it returned to the quick playful parts.

"Ni kan," my mother said, calling me over with hurried hand gestures, "Look here."

I could see why my mother was fascinated by the music. It was being pounded out by a little Chinese girl, about nine years old, with a Peter Pan haircut. The girl had the sauciness[12] of a Shirley Temple. She was proudly modest like a proper Chinese child. And she also did this fancy sweep of a curtsy, so that the fluffy skirt of her white dress cascaded slowly to the floor like the petals of a large carnation.

In spite of these warning signs, I wasn't worried. Our family had no piano and we couldn't afford to buy one, let alone reams of sheet music and piano lessons. So I could be generous in my comments when my mother bad-mouthed[13] the little girl on TV.

"Play note right, but doesn't sound good! No singing sound," complained my mother.

"What are you picking on her for?" I said carelessly. "She's pretty good. Maybe she's not the best, but she's trying hard." I knew almost immediately I would be sorry I said that.

"Just like you," she said. "Not the best. Because you not trying." She gave a little huff as she let go of the sound dial and sat down on the sofa.

The little Chinese girl sat down also to play an encore of "Anitra's Dance" by Grieg. I remember the song, because later on I had to learn how to play it.

Three days after watching The Ed Sullivan Show, my mother told me what my schedule would be for piano lessons and piano practice. She had talked to Mr. Chong, who lived on the first floor of our apartment building. Mr. Chong was a retired piano teacher and my mother had traded housecleaning services for weekly lessons and a piano for me to practice on every day, two hours a day, from four until six.

When my mother told me this, I felt as though I had been sent to hell. I whined and then kicked my foot a little when I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Why don't you like me the way I am? I'm not a genius! I can't play the piano. And even if I could, I wouldn't go on TV if you paid me a million dollars!" I cried.

My mother slapped me. "Who ask you be genius?" she shouted. "Only ask you be your best. For you sake. You think I want you be genius? Hnnh! What for! Who ask you!"

"So ungrateful," I heard her mutter in Chinese. "If she had as much talent as she has temper, she would be famous now."

Mr. Chong, whom I secretly nicknamed Old Chong, was very strange, always tapping his fingers to the silent music of an invisible orchestra. He looked ancient in my eyes. He had lost most of the hair on top of his head and he wore thick glasses and had eyes that always looked tired and sleepy. But he must have been younger than I thought, since he lived with his mother and was not yet married.

I met Old Lady Chong once and that was enough. She had this peculiar smell like a baby that had done something in its pants. And her fingers felt like a dead person's, like an old peach I once found in the back of the refrigerator, the skin just slid off the mat when I picked it up.

I soon found out why Old Chong had retired from teaching piano. He was deaf. "Like Beethoven!" he shouted to me. "We're both listening only in our head!" And he would start to conduct his frantic silent sonatas.

Our lessons went like this. He would open the book and point to different things, explaining their purpose: "Key! Treble! Bass! No sharps or flats! So this is C major! Listen now and play after me!"

And then he would play the C scale a few times, a simple chord, and then, as if inspired by an old, unreachable itch, he gradually added more notes and running trills and a pounding bass until the music was really something quite grand.

I would play after him, the simple scale, the simple chord, and then I just played some nonsense that sounded like a cat running up and down on top of garbage cans. Old Chong smiled and applauded and then said, "Very good! But now you must learn to keep time!"

So that's how I discovered that Old Chong's eyes were too slow to keep up with the wrong notes I was playing. He went through the motions in half-time. To help me keep rhythm, he stood behind me, pushing down on my right shoulder for every beat. He balanced pennies on top of my wrists so I would keep them still as I slowly played scales and arpeggios[14]. He had me curve my hand around an apple and keep that shape when playing chords. He marched stiffly to show me how to make each finger dance up and down, staccato[15] like an obedient little soldier.

He taught me all these things, and that was how I also learned I could be lazy and get away with mistakes, lots of mistakes. If I hit the wrong notes because I hadn't practiced enough, I never corrected myself. I just kept playing in rhythm. And Old Chong kept conducting his own private reverie.

So maybe I never really gave myself a fair chance. I did pick up the basics pretty quickly, and I might have become a good pianist at that young age. But I was so determined not to try, not to be anybody different that I learned to play only the most ear-splitting preludes, the most discordant hymns.

Over the next year, I practiced like this, dutifully in my own way. And then one day I heard my mother and her friend Lindo Jong both talking in a loud bragging tone of voice so others could hear. It was after church, and I was leaning against the brick wall wearing a dress with stiff white petticoats. Auntie Lindo's daughter, Waverly, who was about my age, was standing farther down the wall about five feet away. We had grown up together and shared all the closeness of two sisters squabbling over crayons and dolls. In other words, for the most part, we hated each other. I thought she was snotty. Waverly Jong had gained a certain amount of fame as "Chinatown's Littlest Chinese Chess Champion."

"She bring home too many trophy," lamented Auntie Lindo that Sunday. "All day she play chess. All day I have no time to do nothing but dust off her winnings." She threw a scolding look at Waverly, who pretended not to see her.

"You lucky you don't have this problem" said Auntie Lindo with a sigh to my mother.

And my mother squared her shoulders and bragged: "Our problem worser[16] than yours. If we ask Jing Mei wash dish, she hear nothing but music. It's like you can't stop this natural talent."

And right then, I determined to put a stop to her foolish pride.

A few weeks later, Old Chong and my mother conspired to have me play in a talent show which would be held in the church hall. By then, my parents had saved up enough to buy me a secondhand[17] piano, a black Wurlitzer spinet[18] with a scarred bench. It was the showpiece of our living room.

For the talent show, I was to play a piece called "Pleading Child" from Schumann's Scenes from Childhood. It was a simple, moody piece that sounded more difficult than it was. I was supposed to memorize the whole thing, playing the repeat parts twice to make the piece sound longer. But I dawdled over it, playing a few bars[19] and then cheating, looking up to see what notes followed. I never really listened to what I was playing. I daydreamed about being somewhere else, about being someone else.

The part I liked to practice best was the fancy curtsy: right foot out, touch the rose on the carpet with a pointed foot, sweep to the side, left leg bends, look up and smile.

My parents invited all the couples from the Joy Luck Club to witness my debut. Auntie Lindo and Uncle Tin were there. Waverly and her two older brothers had also come. The first two rows were filled with children both younger and older than I was. The littlest ones got to go first. They recited simple nursery rhymes, squawked out tunes on miniature violins, twirled Hula Hoops,[20] pranced in pink ballet tutus,[21] and when they bowed or curtsied, the audience would sigh in unison, "Awww," and then clap enthusiastically.

When my turn came, I was very confident. I remember my childish excitement. It was as if I knew, without a doubt, that the prodigy side of me really did exist. I had no fear whatsoever, no nervousness. I remember thinking to myself, This is it! This is it! I looked out over the audience, at my mother's blank face, my father's yawn, Auntie Lindo's stiff-limped smile, Waverly's sulky[22] expression. I had on a white dress layered with sheets of lace, and a pink bow in my Peter Pan haircut. As I sat down I envisioned people jumping to their feet and Ed Sullivan rushing up to introduce me to everyone on TV.

And I started to play. It was so beautiful. I was so caught up in how lovely I looked that at first I didn't worry how I would sound. So it was a surprise to me when I hit the first wrong note and I realized something didn't sound quite right. And then I hit another and another followed that. A chill started at the top of my head and began to trickle down. Yet I couldn't stop playing, as though my hands were bewitched. I kept thinking my fingers would adjust themselves back, like a train switching to the right track. I played this strange jumble through two repeats, the sour notes staying with me all the way to the end.

When I stood up, I discovered my legs were shaking. Maybe I had just been nervous and the audience, like Old Chong, had seen me go through the right motions and had not heard anything wrong at all. I swept my right foot out, went down on my knee, looked up and smiled. The room was quiet, except for Old Chong, who was beaming and shouting, "Bravo! Bravo! Well done!" But then I saw my mother's face, her stricken face. The audience clapped weakly, and as I walked back to my chair, with my whole face quivering as I tried not to cry, I heard a little boy whisper loudly to his mother, "That was awful," and the mother whispered back, "Well, she certainly tried."

And now I realized how many people were in the audience, the whole world it seemed. I was aware of eyes burning into my back. I felt the shame of my mother and father as they sat stiffly throughout the rest of the show.

We could have escaped during intermission. Pride and some strange sense of honor must have anchored my parents to their chairs. And so we watched it all: the eighteen-year-old boy with a fake mustache who did a magic show and juggled flaming hoops while riding a unicycle. The breasted girl with white makeup who sang from Madam Butterfly and got honorable mention. And the eleven-year-old boy who won first prize playing a tricky violin song that sounded like a busy bee.

After the show, the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs from the Joy Luck Club came up to my mother and father.

"Lots of talented kids," Auntie Lindo said vaguely, smiling broadly.

"That was somethin' else," said my father, and I wondered if he was referring to me in humorous way, or whether he even remembered what I had done.

Waverly looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. "You aren't a genius like me," she said matter-of-factly. And if I hadn't felt so bad, I would have pulled her braids and punched her stomach.

But my mother's expression was what devastated me: a quiet, blank look that said she had lost everything. I felt the same way, and it seemed as if everybody were now coming up, like gawkers at the scene of an accident, to see what parts were actually missing. When we got on the bus to go home, my father was humming the busy-bee tune and my mother was silent. I kept thinking she wanted to wait until we got home before shouting at me. But when my father unlocked the door to our apartment, my mother walked in and then went back, into the bedroom. No accusations. No blame. And in a way, I felt disappointed. I had been waiting for her to start shouting, so I could shout back and cry and blame her for all my misery.

I assumed my talent-show fiasco meant I never had to play the piano again. But two days later, after school, my mother came out of the kitchen and saw me watching TV.

"Four clock," she reminded me as if it were any other day. I was stunned, as though she were asking me to go through the talent-show torture again. I wedged myself more tightly in front of the TV.

"Turn off TV," she called from the kitchen five minutes later.

I didn't budge. And then I decided. I didn't have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn't her slave. This wasn't China. I had listened to her before and look what happened. She was the stupid one.

She came out from the kitchen and stood in the arched entryway of the living room. "Four clock," she said once again, louder.

"I'm not going to play anymore," I said nonchalantly. "Why should I? I'm not a genius."

She walked over and stood in front of the TV. I saw her chest was heaving up and down in an angry way.

"No!" I said, and I now felt stronger, as if my true self had finally emerged. So this was what had been inside me all along.

"No! I won't!" I screamed.

She yanked me by the arm, pulled me off the floor, snapped off the TV. She was frighteningly strong, half pulling, half carrying me toward the piano as I kicked the throw rugs under my feet. She lifted me up and onto the hard bench. I was sobbing by now, looking at her bitterly. Her chest was heaving even more and her mouth was open, smiling crazily as if she were pleased I was crying.

"You want me to be someone that I'm not!" I sobbed. "I'll never be the kind of daughter you want me to be!"

"Only two kinds of daughters," she shouted in Chinese. "Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!"

"Then I wish I wasn't your daughter. I wish you weren't my mother," I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. I felt like worms and toads and slimy things were crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced, at last.

"Too late change this," said my mother shrilly.

And I could sense her anger rising to its breaking point. I wanted to see it spill over. And that's when I remembered the babies she had lost in China, the ones we never talked about. "Then I wish I'd never been born!" I shouted, "I wish I were dead! Like them."

It was as if I had said the magic words. Alakazam! —and her face went blank, her mouth closed, her arms went slack, and she backed out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless.

* * *

It was not the only disappointment my mother felt in me. In the years that followed, I failed her so many times, each time asserting my own will, my right to fall short of expectations. I didn't get straight As. I didn't become class president. I didn't get into Stanford. I dropped out of college.

For unlike my mother, I did not believe I could be anything I wanted to be. I could only be me.

And for all those years, we never talked about the disaster at the recital or my terrible accusations afterward at the piano bench. All that remained unchecked, like a betrayal that was now unspeakable. So I never found a way to ask her why she had hoped for something so large that failure was inevitable.

And even worse, I never asked her what frightened me the most: Why had she given up hope?

For after our struggle at the piano, she never mentioned my playing again. The lessons stopped. The lid to the piano was closed, shutting out the dust, my misery, and her dreams.

So she surprised me. A few years ago, she offered to give me the piano, for my thirtieth birthday. I had not played in all those years. I saw the offer as a sign of forgiveness, a tremendous burden removed.

"Are you sure?" I asked shyly. "I mean, won't you and Dad miss it?"

"No, this your piano," she said firmly. "Always your piano. You only one can play."

"Well, I probably can't play anymore," I said. "It's been years."

"You pick up fast," said my mother, as if she knew this was certain. "You have natural talent. You could been genius if you want to."

"No I couldn't."

"You just not trying," said my mother. And she was neither angry nor sad. She said it as if to announce a fact that could never be disproved. "Take it," she said.

But I didn't at first. It was enough that she had offered it to me. And after that, every time I saw it in my parents' living room, standing in front of the bay windows, it made me feel proud, as if it were a shiny trophy I had won back.

Last week I sent a tuner over to my parents' apartment and had the piano reconditioned, for purely sentimental reasons. My mother had died a few months before and I had been getting things in order for my father, a little bit at a time. I put the jewelry in special silk pouches. The sweaters she had knitted in yellow, pink, bright orange —all the colors I hated—I put those in moth-proof boxes. I found some old Chinese silk dresses, the kind with little slits up the sides. I rubbed the old silk against my skin, then wrapped them in tissue and decided to take them home with me.

After I had the piano tuned, I opened the lid and touched the keys. It sounded even richer than I remembered. Really, it was a very good piano. Inside the bench were the same exercise notes with handwritten scales, the same second-hand music books with their covers held together with yellow tape.

I opened up the Schumann book to the dark little piece I had played at the recital. It was on the left-hand side of the page, "Pleading Child." It looked more difficult than I remembered. I played a few bars, surprised at how easily the notes came back to me.

And for the first time, or so it seemed, I noticed the piece on the right-hand side. It was called "Perfectly Contented." I tried to play this one as well. It had a lighter melody but the same flowing rhythm and turned out to be quite easy. "Pleading Child" was shorter but slower; "Perfectly Contented" was longer but faster. And after I played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *prodigy*: an unusually talented child
2. *Of course you can be … Her daughter, she is only best tricky*: the Chinese mothers in this story make errors in English typical of other native speakers of Chinese. Examples of non-standard usage include the deletion of articles, pronouns, and auxiliary verbs.
3. *Shirley Temple*: child megastar of motion pictures during the 1930s and 40s.
4. *the Mission district*: a neighborhood of San Francisco
5. *Peter Pan*: The boy who would never grow up from James M. Barrie's 1902 play of the same title.
6. *Formica*: trademark for laminated plastic tops for tables and kitchen counters
7. *listlessly*: totally lacking in energy or enthusiasm
8. *The Ed Sullivan Show*: a popular variety show that appeared on American television from 1948–1971.
9. *frenzied*: wild and lively
10. *mesmerizing*: hypnotizing
11. *lilting*: light and cheerful
12. *sauciness*: cuteness, pertness
13. *bad-mouthed*: criticize, find fault with
14. *arpeggios*: playing the tones of a chord not simultaneously (together) but one after another in quick succession
15. *staccato*: short, quick tones
16. *worser*: common ESL error combining the -er form of the adjective with what is already the comparative form of the adjective.
17. *secondhand piano*: a used piano
18. *spinet*: a small, compact, upright piano
19. *a few bars*: units of measure in music
20. *Hula Hoops*: a plastic hoop twirled around the body
21. *ballet tutus*: the short skirt worn by ballerinas
22. *sulky*: moody, dissatisfied
23. *honorable mention*: though not an award winner, special recognition is given for excellence
24. *devastated*: overwhelmed or destroyed
25. *gawkers*: onlookers
26. *fiasco*: disaster
27. *You pick up fast*: you learn quickly

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *What were the first goals that Jing Mei Woo's mother had for her? Why did she give up those early goals?*
2. *How does Jing Mei Woo feel about herself? Did her attitude change as she grew from a child to an adult?*
3. *How does the piano symbolize the conflict between Jing Mei Woo and her mother? How does the piano symbolize the conflict within the mother herself? How does the piano symbolize the resolution of these conflicts?*
4. *How does Jing Mei Woo relate to the other people around her?*
5. *In your own words, explain the meaning of the last two paragraphs of the story.*

Incident

COUNTEE CULLEN

The hurt which children may inflict upon other children is the subject of this poem.

Once riding in old Baltimore,[1]
    Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean[2]
    Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
    And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
    His tongue and called me, "Nigger."[3]

I saw the whole of Baltimore
    From May until December:
Of all the things that happened there
    That's all that I remember.

NOTES ON THE POEM

[1] *Baltimore:* Baltimore, Maryland. Though Maryland fought on the side of the North during the Civil War, many of its inhabitants did not accept people of African ancestry as equals.

[2] *Baltimorean:* an inhabitant of Baltimore.

[3] *Nigger:* a racially derived pejorative term applied to people of African ancestry. It is broadly condemned today as a racial slur.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What is the mood of the poem?*
2. *What is its message?*
3. *In your opinion, is the poet successful in getting the message across?*

The Man who was Almost a Man

RICHARD WRIGHT

For most young people, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood may be getting a job, buying a car, or renting one's own apartment. In the case of Dave Saunders, a young African American growing up in the American South, manhood meant owning his own gun. Rejecting his parents' advice and seeking to prove himself a man, Dave makes decisions that change the course of his life.

Dave struck out across the fields, looking homeward through paling light. Whut's the use talkin wid em niggers in the field?' Anyhow, his mother was putting supper on the table. Them niggers can't understan nothing. One of these days he was going to get a gun and practice shooting, then they couldn't talk to him as though he were a little boy. He slowed, looking at the ground. Shucks, ㊶ Ah ain scareda them even ef they are biggern me!' Aw, Ah know whut Ahma do. Ahm going by ol Joe's sto n git that Sears Roebuck catlog n look at them guns. Mebbe Ma will lemme buy one when she gits mah pay from ol man Hawkins. Ahma beg her t gimme some money. Ahm ol enough to hava gun. Ahm seventeen. Almost a man. He strode, feeling his long loose-jointed limbs. Shucks, a man oughta hava little gun aftah he done worked hard all day.

He came in sight of Joe's store. A yellow lantern glowed on the front porch. He mounted steps and went through the screen door, hearing it bang behind him. There was a strong smell of coal oil and mackerel fish. He felt very confident until he saw fat Joe walk in through the rear door, then his courage began to ooze.

"Howdy, Dave! Whutcha want?"

"How yuh, Mistah Joe? Aw, Ah don wanna buy nothing. Ah jus wanted t see ef yuhd lemme look at tha catlog erwhile."

"Sure! You wanna see it here?"

"Nawsuh.' Ah wants t take it home wid me. Ah'll bring it back termorrow when Ah come in from the fiels."

"You plannin on buying something?"

"Yessuh."

"Your ma lettin you have your own money now?"

"Shucks. Mistah Joe, Ahm gittin t be a man like anybody else!"

Joe laughed and wiped his greasy white face with a red bandanna.

"What you plannin on buyin?"

Dave looked at the floor, scratched his head, scratched his thigh, and smiled. Then he looked up shyly.

"Ah'll tell yuh, Mistah Joe, ef yuh promise yuh won't tell."

"I promise."

"Waal, Ahma buy a gun."

"A gun? What you want with a gun?"

"Ah wanna keep it."

"You ain't nothing but a boy. You don't need a gun."

"Aw, lemme have the catlog, Mistah Joe. Ah'll bring it back."

Joe walked through the rear door. Dave was elated. He looked around at barrels of sugar and flour. He heard Joe coming back. He craned his neck to see if he were bringing the book. Yeah, he's got it. Gawddog,[4] he's got it!

"Here, but be sure you bring it back. It's the only one I got."

"Sho,[5] Mistah Joe."

"Say, if you wanna buy a gun, why don't you buy one from me? I gotta gun to sell."

"Will it shoot?"

"Sure it'll shoot."

"Whut kind is it?"

"Oh, it's kinda old…a left-hand Wheeler. A pistol. A big one."

"Is it got bullets in it?"

"It's loaded."

"Kin Ah see it?"

"Where's your money?"

"What yuh wan fer it?"

"I'll let you have it for two dollars."

"Just two dollahs? Shucks, Ah could buy tha when Ah git mah pay."

"I'll have it here when you want it."

"Awright, suh. Ah be in fer it."

He went through the door, hearing it slam again behind him. Ahma git some money from Ma n buy me a gun! Only two dollahs! He tucked the thick catalogue under his arm and hurried.

"Where yuh been, boy?" His mother held a steaming dish of black-eyed peas.

"Aw, Ma, Ah just stopped down the road t talk wid the boys."

"Yuh know bettah t keep suppah waiting."

He sat down, resting the catalogue on the edge of the table.

"Yuh git up from there and git to the well n wash yosef! Ah ain feedin no hogs in mah house!"

She grabbed his shoulder and pushed him. He stumbled out of the room, then came back to get the catalogue.

"Whut this?"

"Aw, Ma, it's jusa catlog."

"Who yuh git it from?"

"From Joe, down at the sto."

"Waal, thas good. We kin use it in the outhouse."

"Naw, Ma." He grabbed for it. "Gimme ma catlog, Ma."

She held onto it and glared at him.

"Quit hollerin at me! Whut's wrong wid yuh? Yuh crazy?"

"But Ma, please. It ain mine! It's Joe's! He tol me t bring it back t im termorrow."

She gave up the book. He stumbled down the back steps, hugging the thick book under his arm. When he had splashed water on his face and hands, he groped back to the kitchen and fumbled in a corner for the towel. He bumped into a chair; it clattered to the floor. The catalogue sprawled at his feet. When he had dried his eyes he snatched up the book and held it again under his arms. His mother stood watching him.

"Now, ef yuh gonna act a fool over that ol book, Ah'll take it n burn it up."

"Naw, Ma, please."

"Waal, set down n be still!"

He sat down and drew the oil lamp close. He thumbed page after page, unaware of the food his mother set on the table. His father came in. Then his small brother.

"Whutcha got there, Dave?" his father asked.

"Jusa catlog," he answered, not looking up.

"Yeah, here they is!" His eyes glowed at blue-and-black revolvers. He glanced up, feeling sudden guilt. His father was watching him. He eased the book under the table and rested it on his knees. After the blessing was asked,[6] he ate. He scooped up peas and swallowed fat meat without chewing. Buttermilk helped to wash it down. He did not want to mention money before his father. He would do much better by cornering his mother when she was alone. He looked at his father uneasily out of the edge of his eye.

"Boy, how come yuh don quit foolin wid tha book n eat yo suppah?"

"Yessuh."

"How you n ol man Hawkins gitten erlong?"

"Suh?"

"Can't yuh hear? Why don yuh listen? Ah ast you how wuz yuh n ol man Hawkins gittin erlong?"

"Oh, swell, Pa. Ah plows mo lan than anybody over there."

"Waal, yuh oughta keep you mind on whut yuh doin."

"Yessuh."

He poured his plate full of molasses and sopped it up slowly with a chunk of cornbread. When his father and brother had left the kitchen, he still sat and looked again at the guns in the catalogue, longing to muster courage enough to present his case to his mother. Lawd, ef Ah only had tha pretty one! He could almost feel the slickness of the weapon with his fingers. If he had a gun like that he would polish it and keep it shining so it would never rust. N Ah'd keep it loaded, by Gawd!

"Ma?" His voice was hesitant.

"Hunh?"

"Ol man Hawkins give yuh mah money yit?"

"Yeah, but ain no usa yuh thinking about throwin nona it erway. Ahm keeping tha money sos yuh kin have cloes t go to school this winter."[9]

He rose and went to her side with the open catalogue in his palms. She was washing dishes, her head bent low over a pan. Shyly he raised the book. When he spoke, his voice was husky, faint.

"Ma, Gawd knows Ah wans one of these."

"One of whut?" she asked, not raising her eyes.

"One of these," he said again, not daring even to point. She glanced up at the page, then at him with wide eyes.

"Nigger,"[10] is yuh gone plumb crazy?"

"Aw, Ma—"

"Git outta here! Don yuh talk t me bout no gun! Yuh a fool!"

"Ma, Ah kin buy one fer two dollahs."

"Not ef Ah knows it, yuh ain!"

"But yuh promised me one—"

"Ah don care what Ah promised! Yuh ain nothing but a boy yit!"

"Ma ef yuh lemme buy one Ah'll never ast yuh fer nothing no mo."

"Ah tol yuh t git outta here! Yuh ain gonna toucha penny of tha money fer no gun! Thas how come Ah has Mistah Hawkins t pay yu wages t me, cause Ah knows yuh ain got no sense."

"But, Ma, we needa gun. Pa ain got no gun. We needa gun in the house. Yuh kin never tell whut might happen."

"Now don yuh try to maka fool outta me, boy! Ef we did hava gun, yuh wouldn't have it!"

He laid the catalogue down and slipped his arm around her waist.

"Aw, Ma, Ah done worked hard alla summer n ain ast yuh fer nothing, is Ah, now?"

"Thas whut yuh spose t do!"

"But Ma, Ah wans a gun. Yuh kin lemme have two dollahs outta mah money. Please, Ma. I kin give it to Pa . . . Please, Ma! Ah loves yuh, Ma."

When she spoke her voice came soft and low.

"What yu wan wida gun, Dave? Yuh don need no gun. Yuh'll git in trouble. N ef yo pa jus thought Ah let yuh have money t buy a gun he'd hava fit."

"Ah'll hide it, Ma. It ain but two dollahs."

"Lawd, chil, whut's wrong wid yuh?"

"Ain nothin wrong, Ma. Ahm almos a man now. Ah wans a gun."

"Who gonna sell yuh a gun?"

"Ol Joe at the sto."

"N it don cos but two dollahs?"

"Thas all, Ma. Jus two dollahs. Please, Ma."

She was stacking the plates away; her hands moved slowly, reflectively. Dave kept an anxious silence. Finally, she turned to him.

"Ah'll let yuh git tha gun ef yuh promise me one thing."

"Whut's tha, Ma?"

"Yuh bring it straight back t me, yuh hear? It be fer Pa."

"Yessum! Lemme go now, Ma."

She stooped, turned slightly to one side, raised the hem of her dress, rolled down the top of her stocking, and came up with a slender wad of bills.

"Here," she said. "Lawd knows yuh don need no gun. But yer pa does. Yuh bring it right back t me, yuh hear? Ahma put it up. Now ef yuh don, Ahma have yuh pa lick yuh so hard yuh won fergit it."[11]

"Yessum."

He took the money, ran down the steps, and across the yard.

"Dave! Yuuuuu Daaaaave!"

He heard, but he was not going to stop now. "Naw, Lawd!"

The first movement he made the following morning was to reach under his pillow for the gun. In the gray light of dawn he held it loosely, feeling a sense of power. Could kill a man with a gun like this. Kill anybody, black or white. And if he were holding his gun in his hand, nobody could run over him; they would have to respect him. It was a big gun, with a long barrel and a heavy handle. He raised and lowered it in his hand, marveling at its weight.

He had not come straight home with it as his mother had asked; instead he had stayed out in the fields, holding the weapon in his hand, aiming it now and then at some imaginary foe. But he had not fired it; he had been afraid that his father might hear. Also he was not sure he knew how to fire it.

To avoid surrendering the pistol he had not come into the house until he knew that they were all asleep. When his mother had tiptoed to his bedside late that night and demanded the gun, he had first played possum;[12] then he had told her that the gun was hidden outdoors, that he would bring it to her in the morning. Now he lay turning it slowly in his hands. He broke it, took out the cartridges, felt them, and then put them back.

He slid out of bed, got a long strip of old flannel from a trunk, wrapped the gun in it, and tied it to his naked thigh while it was still loaded. He did not go in to breakfast. Even though it was not yet daylight, he started for Jim Hawkins' plantation. Just as the sun was rising he reached the barns where the mules and plows were kept.

"Hey! That you, Dave?"

He turned. Jim Hawkins stood eying him suspiciously.

"What're yuh doing here so early?"

"Ah didn't know Ah wuz gittin up so early, Mistah Hawkins. Ah was fixin t hitch up ol Jenny n take her t the fiels."[13]

"Good. Since you're so early, how about plowing that stretch down by the woods?"

"Suits me, Mistah Hawkins."

"O.K. Go to it!"

He hitched Jenny to a plow and started across the fields. Hot dog![14] This was just what he wanted. If he could get down by the woods, he could shoot his gun and nobody would hear. He walked behind the plow, hearing the traces[15] creaking, feeling the gun tied tight to his thigh.

When he reached the woods, he plowed two whole rows before he decided to take out the gun. Finally, he stopped, looked in all directions, then untied the gun and held it in his hand. He turned to the mule and smiled.

"Know whut this is, Jenny? Naw, yuh wouldn know! Yuhs jusa ol mule! Anyhow, this is a gun, n it kin shoot, by Gawd!"

He held the gun at arm's length. Whut t hell, Ahma shoot this thing. He looked at Jenny again.

"Lissen here, Jenny! When Ah pull this ol trigger, Ah don wan yuh to run n acka fool now?"

Jenny stood with head down, her short ears pricked straight. Dave walked off about twenty feet, held the gun far out from him at arm's length, and turned his head. Hell, he told himself, Ah ain afraid. The gun felt loose in his fingers; he waved it wildly for a moment. Then he shut his eyes and tightened his forefinger. Bloom! A report[16] half deafened him and he thought his right hand was torn from his arm. He heard Jenny whinnying and galloping over the field, and he found himself on his knees, squeezing his fingers hard between his legs. His hand was numb; he jammed it into his mouth, trying to warm it, trying to stop the pain. The gun lay at his feet. He did not quite know what had happened. He stood up and stared at the gun as though it were a living thing. He gritted his teeth and kicked the gun. Yuh almos broke mah arm! He turned to look for Jenny; she was far over the fields, tossing her head and kicking wildly.

"Hol on there, ol mule!"

When he caught up with her she stood trembling, walling her big white eyes at him. The plow was far away; the traces had broken. Then Dave stopped short, looking, not believing. Jenny was bleeding. Her left side was red and wet with blood. He went closer. Lawd, have mercy! Wondah did Ah shoot this mule? He grabbed for Jenny's mane. She flinched, snorted, whirled, tossing her head.

"Hol on now! Hol on."

Then he saw the hole in Jenny's side, right between the ribs. It was round, wet, red. A crimson stream streaked down the front leg, flowing fast. Good Gawd! Ah wuzn't shootin at tha mule. He felt panic. He knew he had to stop that blood, or Jenny would bleed to death. He had never seen so much blood in all his life. He chased the mule for half a mile, trying to catch her. Finally she stopped, breathing hard, stumpy tail half arched. He caught her mane and led her back to where the plow and gun lay. Then he stooped and grabbed handfuls of damp black earth and tried to plug the bullet hole. Jenny shuddered, whinnied, and broke from him.

"Hol on! Hol on now!"

He tried to plug it again, but blood came anyhow. His fingers were hot and sticky. He rubbed dirt into his palms, trying to dry them. Then again he attempted to plug the bullet hole, but Jenny shied away, kicking her heels high. He stood helpless. He had to do something. He ran at Jenny; she dodged him. He watched a red stream of blood flow down Jenny's leg and form a bright pool at her feet.

"Jenny.... Jenny," he called weakly.

His lips trembled. She's bleeding t death! He looked in the direction of home, wanting to go back, wanting to get help. But he saw the pistol lying in the damp black clay. He had a queer feeling that if he only did something, this would not be; Jenny would not be there bleeding to death.

When he went to her this time, she did not move. She stood with sleepy, dreamy eyes; and when he touched her she gave a low-pitched whinny and knelt to the ground, her front knees slopping in blood.

"Jenny...Jenny...." he whispered.

For a long time she held her neck erect; then her head sank slowly. Her ribs swelled with a mighty heave and she went over.

Dave's stomach felt empty, very empty. He picked up the gun and held it gingerly between his thumb and forefinger. He buried it at the foot of a tree. He took a stick and tried to cover the pool of blood with dirt—but what was the use? There was Jenny lying with her mouth open and her eyes walled and glassy. He could not tell Jim Hawkins he had shot his mule. But he had to tell something. Yeah, Ah'll tell em Jenny started gittin ill n fell on the joint of the plow.... But that would hardly happen to a mule. He walked across the field slowly, head down.

It was sunset. Two of Jim Hawkins' men were over near the edge of the woods digging a hole in which to bury Jenny. Dave was surrounded by a knot of people, all of whom were looking down at the dead mule.

"I don't see how in the world it happened," said Jim Hawkins for the tenth time.

The crowd parted and Dave's mother, father, and small brother pushed into the center.

"Where Dave?" his mother called.

"There he is," said Jim Hawkins.

His mother grabbed him.

"Whut happened, Dave? Whut yuh done?"

"Nothin."

"C'mon, boy, talk," his father said.

Dave took a deep breath and told the story he knew nobody believed.

"Waal," he drawled. "Ah brung ol Jenny down here sos Ah could do ma plowin. Ah plowed bout two rows, just like yuh see." He stopped and pointed at the long rows of upturned earth. "Then somethin musta been wrong wid ol Jenny. She wouldn ack right a-tall. She started snortin n kickin her heels. Ah tried t hol her but she pulled erway, rearin n goin in. Then when the point of the plow was stickin up in the air, she swung erroun n twisted herself back on it.... She stuck herself n started t bleed. N fo Ah could do anything, she wuz dead."

"Did you ever hear of anything like that in all your life?" asked Jim Hawkins.

There were white and black standing in the crowd. They murmured. Dave's mother came close to him and looked hard into his face. "Tell the truth, Dave," she said.

"Looks like a bullet hole to me," said one man.

"Dave, whut yuh do wid tha gun?" his mother asked.

The crowd surged in, looking at him. He jammed his hands into his pockets, shook his head slowly from left to right, and backed away. His eyes were wide and painful.

"Did he hava gun?" asked Jim Hawkins.

"By Gawd, Ah tol yuh tha wuz a gun wound," said a man, slapping his thigh.

His father caught his shoulders and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"Tell whut happened, yuh rascal! Tell whut...."

Dave looked at Jenny's stiff legs and began to cry.

"Whut yuh do wid tha gun?" his mother asked.

"Whut wuz he doin wida gun?" his father asked.

"Come on and tell the truth," said Hawkins. "Ain't nobody going to hurt you...."

His mother crowded close to him.

"Did yuh shoot tha mule, Dave?"

Dave cried, seeing blurred white and black faces.

"Ahh ddinn gggo tt sshooot hher...Ah sswear tt Gawd Ahh ddin.... Ah wuz a-tryin t sssee ef the gggun would sshoot—"

"Where yuh git the gun from?" his father asked.

"Ah got it from Joe, at the sto."

"Where yuh git the money?"

"Ma give it t me."

"He kept worryin me, Bob. Ah had t. Ah tol im t bring the gun right back t me.... It was fer yuh, the gun."

"But how yuh happen to shoot that mule?" asked Jim Hawkins.

"Ah wuzn shootin at the mule, Mistah Hawkins! The gun jumped when Ah pulled the trigger...N fo Ah knowed anythin Jenny was there a-bleedin."

Somebody in the crowd laughed. Jim Hawkins walked close to Dave and looked into his face.

"Well, looks like you have bought you a mule, Dave."

"Ah swear fo Gawd. Ah didn go t kill the mule Mistah Hawkins!"

"But you killed her!"

All the crowd was laughing now. They stood on tiptoe and poked heads over one another's shoulders.

"Well, boy, looks like yuh done bought a dead mule! Hahaha!"

"Ain tha ershame."

"Hohohohoho."

Dave stood, head down, twisting his feet in the dirt.

"Well, you needn't worry about it, Bob," said Jim Hawkins to Dave's father. "Just let the boy keep on working and pay me two dollars a month."

"What yuh wan fer yo mule, Mistah Hawkins?"

Jim Hawkins screwed up his eyes.

"Fifty dollars."

"Whut yuh do wid tha gun?" Dave's father demanded.

Dave said nothing.

"Yuh wan me t take a tree n beat yuh till yuh talk!"

"Nawsuh!"

"Whut yuh do wid it?"

"Ah throwed it erway."

"Where?"

"Ah...Ah throwed it in the creek."

"Waal, c mon home. N firs thing in the mawnin git to tha creek n fin tha gun."

"Yessuh."

"Whut yuh pay fer it?"

"Two dollahs."

"Take tha gun n git yo money back n carry it t Mistah Hawkins, yuh hear? N don fergit Ahma lam you black bottom good fer this! Now march yoself on home, suh!"

Dave turned and walked slowly. He heard people laughing. Dave glared, his eyes welling with tears. Hot anger bubbled in him. Then he swallowed and stumbled on.

That night Dave did not sleep. He was glad that he had gotten out of killing the mule so easily, but he was hurt. Something hot seemed to turn over inside him each time he remembered how they had laughed. He tossed on his bed, feeling his hard pillow. N Pa says he's gonna beat me.... He remembered other beatings, and his back quivered. Naw, naw, Ah sho don wan im t beat me tha way no mo. Dam em all! Nobody ever gave him anything. All he did was work. They treat me like a mule, n then they beat me. He gritted his teeth. N Ma had t tell on me.

Well, if he had to, he would take old man Hawkins that two dollars. But that meant selling the gun. And he wanted to keep that gun. Fifty dollars for a dead mule.

He turned over, thinking how he had fired the gun. He had an itch to fire it again. Ef other men kin shoota gun, by Gawd, Ah kin! He was still, listening. Mebbe they all sleepin now. The house was still. He heard the soft breathing of his brother. Yes, now! He would go down and get that gun and see if he could fire it! He eased out of bed and slipped into overalls.

The moon was bright. He ran almost all the way to the edge of the woods. He stumbled over the ground, looking for the spot where he had buried the gun. Yeah, here it is. Like a hungry dog scratching for a bone, he pawed it up. He puffed his black cheeks and blew dirt from the trigger and barrel. He broke it and found four cartridges unshot. He looked around; the fields were filled with silence and moonlight. He clutched the gun stiff and hard in his fingers. But, as soon as he wanted to pull the trigger, he shut his eyes and turned his head. Naw, Ah can't shoot wid mah eyes closed n mah head turned. With effort he held his eyes open; then he squeezed. Blooooom! He was stiff, not breathing. The gun was still in his hands. Dammit, he'd done it! He fired again. Blooooom! He smiled. Blooooom! Blooooom! Click, click. There! It was empty. If anybody could shoot a gun, he could. He put the gun into his hip pocket and started across the fields.

When he reached the top of a ridge he stood straight and proud in the moonlight, looking at Jim Hawkins' big white house, feeling the gun sagging in his pocket. Lawd, ef Ah had just one mo bullet Ah'd taka shot at tha house. Ah'd like t scare ol man Hawkins jusa little...Jusa enough t let im know Dave Saunders is a man.

To his left the road curved, running to the tracks of the Illinois Central. He jerked his head, listening. From far off came a faint hoooof-hoooof; hoooof-hoooof…. He stood rigid. Two dollahs a mont. Les see now…. Tha means it'll take bout two years. Shucks! Ah'll be dam!

He started down the road, toward the tracks. Yeah, here she comes! He stood beside the track and held himself stiffly. Here she comes, erroun the ben…. C mon, yuh slow poke! C mon! He had his hand on his gun; something quivered in his stomach. Then the train thundered past, the gray and brown box cars rumbling and clinking. He gripped the gun tightly; then he jerked his hand out of his pocket. Ah betcha Bill wouldn't do it! Ah betcha. The cars slid past, steel grinding upon steel. Ahm ridin yuh ternight, so hep me Gawd! He was hot all over. He hesitated just a moment; then he grabbed, pulled atop a car, and lay flat. He felt his pocket; the gun was still there. Ahead the long rails were glinting in the moonlight, stretching away, away to somewhere, somewhere where he could be a man….

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *What's the use talkin wid em niggers in the field?* As a young African American farm boy living in the 1940s, Dave uses a dialect of Black English which is characterized by distinctive phonological, syntactic and semantic features. Numerous vowel changes, consonant deletions, and alternative word choices are evident in Dave's speech, as well as in the non-standard dialects of the other characters in the story. Dave's use of the word *nigger* in reference to his co-workers carries different semantic weight when used by an African American speaker than it does when it is used by someone of a different race. In contemporary American usage, however, the word is considered a racial slur and its use is stigmatized.
2. *Ah ain scareda them even ef they are biggern me!* = I ain't scared of them even if they are bigger than me! Note the use of *ain't* for negating the Be verb (which is common in nonstandard varieties of American English) and the vowel/consonant changes/deletions.
3. *Nawsuh* = No sir
4. *Gawddog*: an exclamation of joy
5. *Shu* = Sure (Yes)
6. *Yuh know bettah t keep suppah waiting* = You know better (than) to keep supper waiting
7. *Yuh git up from there and git to the well n wash yosef!* = You get up from there and get to the well and wash yourself
8. *the blessing*: a prayer said before a meal
9. *Ahm keeping tha money sos yuh kin have cloes t go to school this winter* = I'm keeping that money so you can have clothes to go to school this winter
10. *Nigger*: the mother is using the generic term as a form of address, similar to someone saying Son, Boy, or Man
11. *Ahma have yuh pa lick yuh so hard yuh won fergit it* = I'm (going to) have your pa lick you so hard (that) you won't forget it. *Lick*= punish
12. *played possum*= pretended that he was asleep
13. *Ah was fixin t hitch up ol Jenny n take her t the fiels.*= I was fixing to hitch up old Jenny and take her to the fields. *I was fixing to* = I was planning to
14. *Hot dog!*: (exclamation) Wonderful! Great!
15. *traces*: straps of the harness attached to plow animals
16. *a report*: explosive noise
17. *gingerly*: cautiously
18. *N fo Ah knowed anythin Jenny was there a-bleedin* = And before I knew anything, Jenny was there bleeding

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What is the meaning of the title? How does it apply to Dave?*
2. *How is Dave like other teenagers? How is he different?*
3. *Are Dave's parents good parents? Explain.*
4. *Does Mr. Hawkins deal fairly with Dave? Explain.*
5. *What motivates Dave to make the decision he makes at the end of the story? How could the events have been handled differently to lead to a different conclusion?*
6. *Select one scene from the story and act it out.*

A&P

JOHN UPDIKE

Sammy, the nineteen-year-old narrator of this story, works as a checkout clerk in a grocery store. When three girls come in wearing only their bathing suits, he is all eyes. But as we find out, he also has an independent mind and firm ideas about what is right and what is wrong.

A&P began as a tea company in the mid-19th century. It evolved into the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company (later known as the A&P). It was the first grocery store chain in the United States.

In walks these three girls in nothing but bathing suits.

I'm in the third checkout slot,[1] with my back to the door, so I don't see them until they're over by the bread. The one that caught my eye first was the one in the plaid green two-piece. She was a chunky[2] kid, with a good tan and a sweet broad soft-looking can[3] with those two crescents of white just under it, where the sun never seems to hit, at the top of the backs of her legs. I stood there with my hand on a box of HiHo crackers trying to remember if I rang it up or not. I rung it up again and the customer starts giving me hell. She's one of these cash-register-watchers, a witch about fifty with rouge on her cheekbones and no eyebrows, and I know it made her day to trip me up.[4] She'd been watching cash registers for fifty years and probably never seen a mistake before.

By the time I got her feathers smoothed and her goodies into a bag—she gives me a little snort in passing, if she'd been born at the right time they would have burned her over in Salem[5]—by the time I get her on her way the girls had circled around the bread and were coming back, without a pushcart, back my way along the counters, in the aisle between the checkouts and the Special bins. They didn't even have shoes on. There was this chunky one, with the two-piece—it was bright green and the seams on the bra were still sharp and her belly was still pretty pale so I guessed she just got it (the suit)—there was this one, with one of those chubby berry-faces, the lips all bunched together under her nose, this one, and a tall one, with black hair that hadn't quite frizzed right, and one of these sunburns right across under the eyes, and a chin that was too long—you know, the kind of girl other girls think is very "striking" and "attractive" but never quite makes it, as they very well know, which is why they like her so much—and then the third one, that wasn't quite so tall. She was the queen. She kind of led them, the other two peeking around and making their shoulders round. She didn't look around, not this queen, she just walked straight on slowly, on these long white prima-donna[6] legs. She came down a little hard on her heels, as if she didn't walk in her bare feet that much, putting down her heels and then letting the weight move along to her toes as if she was testing the floor with every step, putting a little deliberate extra action into it. You never know for sure how girls' minds work (do you really think it's a mind in there or just a little buzz like a bee in a glass jar?) but you got the idea she had talked the other two into coming in here with her, and now she was showing them how to do it, walk slow and hold yourself straight.

She had on a kind of dirty-pink—beige maybe, I don't know—bathing suit with a little nubble all over it and, what got me, the straps were down. They were off her shoulders looped loose around the cool tops of her arms, and I guess as a result the suit had slipped a little on her, so all around the top of the cloth there was this shining rim. If it hadn't been there you wouldn't have known there could have been anything whiter than those shoulders. With the straps pushed off, there was nothing between the top of the suit and the top of her head except just her, this clean bare plane of the top of her chest down from the shoulder bones like a dented sheet of metal tilted in the light. I mean, it was more than pretty.

She had sort of oaky[7] hair that the sun and salt had bleached, done up in a bun that was unraveling, and a kind of prim face. Walking into the A&P with your straps down, I suppose it's the only kind of face you can have. She held her head so high her neck, coming up out of those white shoulders, looked kind of stretched, but I didn't mind. The longer her neck was, the more of her there was.

She must have felt in the corner of her eye me and over my shoulder Stokesie in the second slot watching, but she didn't tip.[8] Not this queen. She kept her eyes moving across the racks, and stopped, and turned so slow it made my stomach rub the inside of my apron, and buzzed to the other two, who kind of huddled against her for relief, and then they all three of them went up the cat-and-dog-food-breakfast-cereal-macaroni-rice-raisins-seasonings-spreads-spaghetti-soft-drinks-crackers-and-cookies aisle. From the third slot I look straight up this aisle to the meat counter, and I watched them all the way. The fat one with the tan sort of fumbled with the cookies, but on second thought she put the package back. The sheep[9] pushing their carts down the aisle—the girls were walking against the usual traffic (not that we have one-way signs or anything)—were pretty hilarious. You could see them, when Queenie's white shoulders dawned on them, kind of jerk, or hop, or hiccup, but their eyes snapped back to their own baskets and on they pushed. I bet you could set off dynamite in an A&P and the people would by and large keep reaching and checking their oatmeal off their lists and muttering, "Let me see, there was a third thing, began with A, asparagus, no ah, yes, applesauce!" or whatever it is they do mutter. But there was no doubt, this jiggled them. A few house slaves in pin curlers[10] even looked around after pushing their carts past to make sure what they had seen was correct.

You know, it's one thing to have a girl in a bathing suit down on the beach, where what with the glare nobody can look at each other much anyway, and another thing in the cool of the A&P, under the fluorescent lights, against all those stacked packages, with her feet paddling along naked over our checkerboard green-and-cream rubber-tile floor.

"Oh Daddy," Stokesie said beside me. "I feel so faint."

"Darling," I said. "Hold me tight." Stokesie's married, with two babies chalked up on his fuselage[11] already, but as far as I can tell that's the only difference. He's twenty-two, and I was nineteen this April.

"Is it done?" he asks, the responsible married man finding his voice. I forgot to say he thinks he's going to be manager some sunny day, maybe in 1990 when it's called the Great Alexandrov and Petrooshki[12] Tea Company or something.

What he meant was, our town is five miles from a beach, with a big summer colony out on the Point, but we're right in the middle of town, and the women generally put on a shirt or shorts or something before they get out of the car into the street. And anyway these are usually women with six children and varicose veins[13] mapping their legs and nobody, including them, could care less. As I say, we're right in the middle of town, and if you stand at our front doors you can see two banks and the Congregational church and the newspaper store and three real-estate offices and about twenty-seven old freeloaders[14] tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It's not as if we're on the Cape; we're north of Boston and there's people in this town haven't seen the ocean for twenty years.

The girls had reached the meat counter and were asking McMahon something. He pointed, they pointed, and they shuffled out of sight behind a pyramid of Diet Delight peaches. All that was left for us to see was old

McMahon patting his mouth and looking after them sizing up their joints.[15] Poor kids, I began to feel sorry for them, they couldn't help it.

Now here comes the sad part of the story, at least my family says it's sad, but I don't think it's so sad myself. The store's pretty empty, it being Thursday afternoon, so there was nothing much to do except lean on the register and wait for the girls to show up again. The whole store was like a pinball machine and I didn't know which tunnel they'd come out of. After a while they come around out of the far aisle, around the light bulbs, records at discount of the Caribbean Six or Tony Martin Sings or some such gunk[16] you wonder why they waste the wax[17] on sixpacks of candy bars, and plastic toys done up in cellophane[18] that fall apart when a kid looks at them anyway. Around they come, Queenie still leading the way, and holding a little gray jar in her hand. Slots Three through Seven are unmanned and I could see her wondering between Stokes and me, but Stokesie with his usual luck draws an old party in baggy gray pants who stumbles up with four giant cans of pineapple juice (what do these bums do with all that pineapple juice? I've often asked myself) so the girls come to me. Queenie puts down the jar and I take it into my fingers icy cold. Kingfish Fancy Herring Snacks in Pure Sour Cream: 49 cents. Now her hands are empty, not a ring or a bracelet, bare as God made them, and I wonder where the money's coming from. Still with that prim look she lifts a folded dollar bill out of the hollow at the center of her nubbled pink top. The jar went heavy in my hand. Really, I thought that was so cute.

Then everybody's luck begins to run out. Lengel comes in from haggling[19] with a truck full of cabbages on the lot and is about to scuttle into that door marked MANAGER behind which he hides all day when the girls touch his eye. Lengel's pretty dreary, teaches Sunday school and the rest, but he doesn't miss that much. He comes over and says, "Girls, this isn't the beach."

Queenie blushes, though maybe it's just a brush of sunburn I was noticing for the first time, now that she was so close. "My mother asked me to pick up a jar of herring snacks." Her voice kind of startled me, the way voices do when you see the people first, coming out so flat and dumb yet kind of tony, too, the way it ticked over "pick up" and "snacks." All of a sudden I slid right down her voice into her living room. Her father and the other men were standing around in ice-cream coats and bow ties and the women were in sandals picking up herring snacks on toothpicks off a big glass plate and they were all holding drinks[20] the color of water with olives and sprigs of mint in them. When my parents have somebody over they get lemonade and if it's a real racy[21] affair Schlitz[22] in tall glasses with "They'll Do It Every Time" cartoons stenciled on.

"That's all right," Lengel said. "But this isn't the beach." His repeating this struck me as funny, as if it had just occurred to him, and he had been thinking all these years the A&P was a great big dune[23] and he was the head lifeguard. He didn't like my smiling—as I say he doesn't miss much—but he concentrates on giving the girls that sad Sunday-school-superintendent stare.

Queenie's blush is no sunburn now, and the plump one in plaid, that I liked better from the back—a really sweet can—pipes up, "We weren't doing any shopping. We just came in for the one thing."

"That makes no difference," Lengel tells her, and I could see from the way his eyes went that he hadn't noticed she was wearing a two-piece before. "We want you decently dressed when you come in here."

"We are decent," Queenie says suddenly, her lower lip pushing, getting sore now that she remembers her place, a place from which the crowd that runs the A&P must look pretty crummy. Fancy Herring Snacks flashed in her very blue eyes.

"Girls, I don't want to argue with you. After this, come in here with your shoulders covered. It's our policy." He turns his back. That's policy for you. Policy is what the kingpins want. What the others want is juvenile delinquency.

All this while, the customers had been showing up with their carts but, you know, sheep, seeing a scene, they had all bunched up on Stokesie, who shook open a paper bag as gently as peeling a peach, not wanting to miss a word. I could feel in the silence everybody getting nervous, most of all Lengel, who asks me, "Sammy, have you rung up their purchase?"

I thought and said "No" but it wasn't about that I was thinking. I go through the punches, 4, 9, GROC, TOT—it's more complicated than you think, and after you do it often enough, it begins to make a little song, that you hear words to, in my case "Hello (bing) there, you (gung) hap-py pee-pul[24] (splat)!"— the splat being the drawer flying out. I uncrease the bill, tenderly as you may imagine, it just having come from between the two smoothest scoops of vanilla I had ever known were there, and pass a half and a penny[illegible] into her narrow pink palm, and nestle the herrings in a bag and twist its neck and hand it over, all the time thinking.

The girls, and who'd blame them, are in a hurry to get out, so I say "I quit" to Lengel quick enough for them to hear, hoping they'll stop and watch me, their unsuspected hero. They keep right on going, into the electric eye; the door flies open and they flicker across the lot to their car, Queenie and Plaid and Big Tall Goony-Goony (not that as raw material she was so bad), leaving me with Lengel and a kink in his eyebrow.

"Did you say something, Sammy?"

"I said I quit."

"I thought you did."

"You didn't have to embarrass them."

"It was they who were embarrassing us."

I started to say something that came out "Fiddle-de-doo." It's a saying of my grandmother's, and I know she would have been pleased.

"I don't think you know what you're saying," Lengel said.

"I know you don't," I said. "But I do." I pull the bow at the back of my apron and start shrugging it off my shoulders. A couple customers that had been heading for my slot begin to knock against each other, like scared pigs in a chute.

Lengel sighs and begins to look very patient and old and gray. He's been a friend of my parents for years. "Sammy, you don't want to do this to your Mom and Dad," he tells me. It's true, I don't. But it seems to me that once you begin a gesture it's fatal not to go through with it. I fold the apron, "Sammy" stitched in red on the pocket, and put it on the counter, and drop the bow tie on top of it. The bow tie is theirs, if you've ever wondered. "You'll feel this for the rest of your life," Lengel says, and I know that's true, too, but remembering how he made that pretty girl blush makes me so scrunchy[illegible] inside I punch the No Sale tab and the machine whirs "pee-pul" and the drawer splats out. One advantage to this scene taking place in summer, I can follow this up with a clean exit, there's no fumbling around getting your coat and galoshes,[illegible] I just saunter[illegible] into the electric eye in my white shirt that my mother ironed the night before, and the door heaves itself open, and outside the sunshine is skating around on the asphalt.

I look around for my girls, but they're gone, of course. There wasn't anybody but some young married[illegible] screaming with her children about some candy they didn't get by the door of a powder-blue Falcon station wagon. Looking back in the big windows, over the bags of peat moss and aluminum lawn furniture stacked on the pavement, I could see Lengel in my place in the slot, checking the sheep through. His face was dark gray and his back stiff, as if he'd just had an injection of iron, and my stomach kind of fell as I felt how hard the world was going to be to me hereafter.

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *checkout slot*: a cashier's aisle for changing and bagging the items bought
2. *chunky*: somewhat fat, stocky
3. *can*: (impolite) slang term for seat or behind
4. *trip me up*: to catch someone making a mistake
5. *Salem*: Salem, Massachusetts. During the seventeenth century, people accused of being witches were burned at the stake.
6. *prima-donna*: a self-centered or temperamental person
7. *oaky*: the color of oak
8. *she didn't tip*: she gave no indication or sign to let anyone know
9. *sheep*: all the customers who follow the same routine in the store
10. *houseslaves in pin curlers*: (used derogatively) housewives with their hair in pin curlers
11. *two babies chalked up on his fuselage*: as fighter pilots mark the number of planes they have shot down on the fuselage of their aircraft, Sammy is saying Stokesie is marking down on his body how many children he has fathered.
12. *Alexandrov and Petrooshki*: the **A&P** under control of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The story was written during the Cold War, when many people felt that the Soviets would take over the world. Sammy is sarcastically referring to this fear as he looks ahead into what was then the future (1990).
13. *varicose veins*: abnormally swollen veins clearly visible in one's legs
14. *twenty-seven old freeloaders*: public workers who Sammy feels are not earning their wages.
15. *sizing up their joints*: (impolite) carefully looking over every bit of their bodies
16. *gunk*: (slang) worthless matter
17. *waste the wax*: At the time the story was written, phonograph recordings were produced by a process employing hot wax.
18. *cellophane*: transparent material used for packaging
19. *haggling*: arguing about the price
20. *drinks the color of water ... mint in them*: martinis made from gin and dry vermouth—both colorless alcoholic drinks
21. *racy*: daring or somewhat out of the ordinary; risque or slightly improper
22. Schlitz: a brand of American beer
23. *dune*: a hill of sand. Cape Cod Massachusetts (close to the site of this story) is famous for its sand dunes bordering the Atlantic Ocean.
24. *pee-pul* = people
25. *a half and a penny* = a half dollar and one cent ($0.51)
26. *scrunchy*: squeezing together, tightening up
27. *galoshes*: boots
28. *saunter*: walk leisurely or in a relaxed manner
29. *young married* = a young married person

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What kind of person is Sammy? Would you like him as a friend? Would you like him as your son?*
2. *Who do you think Sammy is telling the story to? How old is/are his listener/s? What sex? Find specific sentences in the story that support your point of view.*
3. *What is your opinion of the three girls? Would you like to be friends with any or all of them? Explain.*
4. *What does Sammy mean in the last sentence of the story? How does this relate to the whole story?*
5. *How do you think Sammy's parents reacted when he told them what had happened at the A&P? In groups of three, do a roleplay of Sammy, his father, and his mother discussing what happened at the A&P and what Sammy ought to do next.*

families

The trouble with most families with many children is someone gets lost.
There isn't time, it seems, for everyone. Well, I will give equally to all of you.
I will share out my knowledge and attention with everyone.
I wish to be a great warm pie fresh from the oven, with
equal shares to be taken by all. No one will starve.

Ray Bradbury

I Sing the Body Electric!

RAY BRADBURY

The special relationship between a grandmother and her grandchildren is examined in this happy/sad, funny/touching story. When a custom-built electric grandmother comes to take care of three children whose mother has recently died, the children come to a better understanding of what it means to be human and to share love with one another.

Grandma!

I remember her birth.

Wait, you say, no man remembers his own grandma's birth.

But, yes, we remember the day that she was born.

For we, her grandchildren, slapped her to life. Timothy, Agatha, and I, Tom, raised up our hands and brought them down in a huge crack! We shook together the bits and pieces, parts and samples, textures and tastes, humors and distillations that would move her compass needle north to cool us, south to warm and comfort us, east and west to travel round the endless world, glide her eyes to know us, mouth to sing us asleep by night, hands to touch us awake at dawn.

Grandma, O dear and wondrous electric dream....

When storm lightnings rove the sky making circuitries amidst the clouds, her name flashes on my inner lid. Sometimes still I hear her ticking, humming above our beds in the gentle dark. She passes like a clock-ghost in the long halls of memory, like a hive of intellectual bees swarming after the Spirit of Summers Lost. Sometimes still I feel the smile I learned from her, printed on my cheek at three in the deep morn....

All right, all right! you cry, what was it like the day your damned and wondrous-dreadful-loving Grandma was born?

It was the week the world ended....

Our mother was dead.

One late afternoon a black car left Father and the three of us stranded on our own front drive staring at the grass, thinking.

That's not our grass. There are the croquet mallets, balls, hoops, yes, just as they fell and lay three days ago when Dad stumbled out on the lawn, weeping with the news. There are the roller skates that belonged to a boy, me, who will never be that young again. And yes, there the tire–swing on the old oak, but Agatha afraid to swing. It would surely break. It would fall.

And the house? Oh, God…

We peered through the front door, afraid of the echoes we might find confused in the halls; the sort of clamor that happens when all the furniture is taken out and there is nothing to soften the river of talk that flows in any house at all hours. And now the soft, the warm, the main piece of lovely furniture was gone forever.

The door drifted wide.

Silence came out. Somewhere a cellar door stood wide and a raw wind blew damp earth from under the house.

But, I thought, we don't have a cellar!

"Well," said Father.

We did not move.

Aunt Clara drove up the path in her big canary–colored limousine.

We jumped through the door. We ran to our rooms. We heard them shout and then speak and then shout and then speak: "Let the children live with me!" Aunt Clara said. "They'd rather kill themselves!" Father said.

A door slammed. Aunt Clara was gone.

We almost danced. Then we remembered what had happened and went downstairs.

Father sat alone talking to himself or to a remnant ghost of Mother left from the days before her illness, but jarred loose now by the slamming of the door. He murmured to his hands his empty palms:

"The children need someone. I love them but, let's face it I must work to feed us all. You love them, Ann, but you're gone. And Clara? Impossible. She loves but smothers.[3] And as for maids, nurses—?"

Here Father sighed and we sighed with him, remembering.

The luck we had had with maids or live–in teachers or sitters was beyond intolerable. Hardly a one who wasn't a crosscut saw grabbing against the grain. Hand axes and hurricanes best described them. Or, conversely, they were all fallen trifle, damp souffle.[4] We children were unseen furniture to be sat upon or dusted or sent for reupholstering come spring and fall, with a yearly cleansing at the beach.

"What we need," said Father, "is a…"

We all leaned to his whisper.

"…grandmother."

"But," said Timothy, with the logic of nine years, "all our grandmothers are dead."

"Yes in one way, no in another."

What a fine mysterious thing for Dad to say.

"Here," he said at last.

He handed us a multifold, multicolored pamphlet. We had seen it in his hands, off and on, for many weeks, and very often during the last few days. Now, with one blink of our eyes, as we passed the paper from hand to hand, we knew why Aunt Clara, insulted, outraged, had stormed from the house.

Timothy was the first to read aloud from what he saw on the first page:

"I Sing the Body Electric!"

He glanced up at Father, squinting. "What the heck does that mean?"

"Read on."

Agatha and I glanced guiltily about the room, afraid Mother might suddenly come in to find us with this blasphemy, but then nodded to Timothy, who read:

"'Fanto—'"

"Fantoccini," Father prompted.

"'Fantoccini Ltd. We Shadow Forth…the answer to all your most grievous problems. One Model Only, upon which a thousand times a thousand variations can be added, subtracted, subdivided, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.'"[5]

"Where does it say that?" we all cried.

"It doesn't." Timothy smiled for the first time in days. "I just had to put that in. Wait." He read on: "'for you who have worried over inattentive sitters, nurses who cannot be trusted with marked liquor bottles, and well–meaning Uncles and Aunts—'"

"Well–meaning, but!" said Agatha, and I gave an echo.

"'—we have perfected the first humanoid–genre minicircuited, rechargeable AC–DC Mark V Electrical Grandmother…'"

"Grandmother!?"

The paper slipped away to the floor. "Dad…?"

"Don't look at me that way," said Father. "I'm half–mad with grief, and half–mad thinking of tomorrow and the day after that. Someone pick up the paper. Finish it."

"I will," I said, and did:

"'The Toy that is more than a Toy, the Fantoccini Electrical Grandmother is built with loving precision[6] to give the incredible precision of love to your children. The child at ease with the realities of the world and the even greater realities of the imagination, is her aim.'"

"'She is computerized to tutor in twelve languages simultaneously, capable of switching tongues in a thousandth of a second without pause, and has a complete knowledge of the religious, artistic, and sociopolitical histories of the world seeded in her master hive—'"

"How great!" said Timothy. "It makes it sound as if we were to keep bees! Educated bees!"

"Shut up!" said Agatha.

"Above all," I read, "'this human being, for human she seems, this embodiment in electro-intelligent facsimile of the humanities, will listen, know, tell, react and love your children insofar as such great Objects, such fantastic Toys, can be said to Love, or can be imagined to Care. This Miraculous Companion, excited to the challenge of large world and small, inner Sea or Outer Universe, will transmit by touch and tell, said Miracles to your Needy.'"

"Our Needy," murmured Agatha.

Why, we all thought, sadly, that's us, oh, yes, that's us.

I finished:

"'We do not sell our Creation to able-bodied families where parents are available to raise, effect, shape, change, love their own children. Nothing can replace the parent in the home. However there are families where death or ill health or disablement undermines the welfare of the children. Orphanages seem not the answer. Nurses tend to be selfish, neglectful, or suffering from dire nervous afflictions.'"

"'With the utmost humility then, and recognizing the need to rebuild, rethink, and regrow our conceptualizations from month to month, year to year, we offer the nearest thing to the Ideal Teacher-Friend-Companion-Blood Relation. A trial period can be arranged for—'"

"Stop," said Father. "Don't go on. Even I can't stand it."

"Why?" said Timothy. "I was just getting interested."

I folded the pamphlet up. "Do they really have these things?"

"Let's not talk any more about it," said Father, his hand over his eyes. "It was a mad thought—"

"Not so mad," I said, glancing at Tim. "I mean, heck, even if they tried, whatever they built, couldn't be worse than Aunt Clara, huh?"

And then we all roared. We hadn't laughed in months. And now my simple words made everyone hoot and howl and explode. I opened my mouth and yelled happily, too.

When we stopped laughing, we looked at the pamphlet and I said, "Well?"

"I—" Agatha scowled, not ready.

"We do need something, bad, right now," said Timothy.

"I have an open mind," I said, in my best pontifical style.

"There's only one thing," said Agatha. "We can try it. Sure."

"But—tell me this—when do we cut out all this talk and when does our real mother come home to stay?"

There was a single gasp from the family as if, with one shot, she had struck us all in the heart.

I don't think any of us stopped crying the rest of that night.

It was a clear bright day. The helicopter tossed us lightly up and over and down through the skyscrapers and let us out, almost for a trot and caper, on top of the building where the large letters could be read from the sky:

FANTOCCINI.

"What are Fantoccini?" said Agatha.

"It's an Italian word for shadow puppets, I think, or dream people," said Father.

"But shadow forth, what does that mean?"

"WE TRY TO GUESS YOUR DREAM," I said.

"Bravo," said Father. "A-plus."

I beamed.

The helicopter flapped a lot of loud shadows over us and went away.

We sank down in an elevator as our stomachs sank up. We stepped out onto a moving carpet that streamed away on a blue river of wool toward a desk over which various signs hung:

THE CLOCK SHOP
Fantoccini Our Specialty.
Rabbits on walls no problem.

"Rabbits on walls?"

I held up my fingers in profile as if I held them before a candle flame, and wiggled the "ears."

"Here's a rabbit, here's a wolf, here's a crocodile."

"Of course," said Agatha.

And we were at the desk. Quiet music drifted about us. Somewhere behind the walls, there was a waterfall of machinery flowing softly. As we arrived at the desk, the lighting changed to make us look warmer, happier, though we were still cold.

All about us in niches and cases, and hung from ceilings on wires and strings were puppets and marionettes, and Balinese kite-bamboo-translucent dolls which, held to the moonlight might acrobat your most secret nightmares or dreams. In passing, the breeze set up by our bodies stirred the various hung souls on their gibbets.

It was like an immense lynching[13] on a holiday at some English crossroads four hundred years before.

You see? I know my history.

Agatha blinked about with disbelief and then some touch of awe and finally disgust.

"Well, if that's what they are, let's go."

"Tush," said Father.

"Well," she protested, "you gave me one of those dumb things with strings two years ago and the strings were in a zillion knots by dinnertime. I threw the whole thing out the window."

"Patience," said Father.

"We shall see what we can do to eliminate the strings."

The man behind the desk had spoken.

We all turned to give him our regard.

Rather like a funeral–parlor man, he had the cleverness not to smile. Children are put off by older people who smile too much. They smell a catch, right off.

Unsmiling, but not gloomy or pontifical, the man said, "Guido Fantoccini, at your service. Here's how we do it, Miss Agatha Simmons, aged eleven."

Now there was a really fine touch.

He knew that Agatha was only ten. Add a year to that, and you're halfway home. Agatha grew an inch. The man went on:

"There."

And he placed a golden key in Agatha's hand.

"To wind them up instead of strings?"

"To wind them up." The man nodded.

"Pshaw!" said Agatha.

Which was her polite form of "rabbit pellets."[14]

"God's truth. Here is the key to your Do–it–Yourself, Select Only the Best, Electrical Grandmother. Every morning you wind her up. Every night you let her run down. You're in charge. You are guardian of the Key."

He pressed the object in her palm where she looked at it suspiciously.

I watched him. He gave me a side wink which said, well, no...but aren't keys fun?

I winked back before she lifted her head.

"Where does this fit?"

"You'll see when the time comes. In the middle of her stomach, perhaps, or up her left nostril or in her right ear."

That was good for a smile as the man arose.

"This way, please. Step light. Onto the moving stream. Walk on the water, please. Yes. There."

He helped to float us. We stepped from rug that was forever frozen onto rug that whispered by.

It was a most agreeable river which floated us along on a green spread of carpeting that rolled forever through halls and into wonderfully secret dim caverns where voices echoed back our own breathing or sang like Oracles to our questions.

"Listen," said the salesman, "the voices of all kinds of women. Wait and find just the right one...!"

And listen we did, to all the high, low, soft, loud, in-between, half-scolding, half-affectionate voices saved over from times before we were born.

And behind us, Agatha tread backward, always fighting the river, never catching up, never with us, holding off.

"Speak," said the salesman, "Yell."

And speak and yell we did.

"Hello. You there! This is Timothy, hi!"

"What shall I say!" I shouted. "Help!"

Agatha walked backward, mouth tight.

Father took her hand. She cried out.

"Let go! No, no! I won't have my voice used! I won't!"

"Excellent." The salesman touched three dials on a small machine he held in his hand.

On the side of the small machine we saw three oscillograph[15] patterns mix, blend, and repeat our cries.

The salesman touched another dial and we heard our voices fly off amidst the Delphic caves[16] to hang upside down, to cluster, to beat words all about, to shriek, and the salesman itched another knob to add, perhaps, a touch of this or a pinch of that, a breath of mother's voice, all unbeknownst, or a splice of father's outrage at the morning's paper or his peaceable one-drink voice at dusk. Whatever it was the salesman did, whispers danced all about us like frantic vinegar gnats, fizzed by lightning, settling round until at last a final switch was pushed and a voice spoke free of a far electronic deep:

"Nefertiti," it said.

Timothy froze. I froze. Agatha stopped treading water.

"Nefertiti?" asked Tim.

"What does that mean?" demanded Agatha.

"I know."

The salesman nodded me to tell.

"Nefertiti," I whispered, "is Egyptian for The Beautiful One Is Here."

"The Beautiful One Is Here," repeated Timothy.

"Nefer," said Agatha, "titi."

And we all turned to stare into that soft twilight, that deep far place from which the good warm soft voice came.

And she was indeed there.

And, by her voice, she was beautiful...

That was it.

That was, at least, the most of it.

The voice seemed more important than all the rest.

Not that we didn't argue about weights and measures: She should not be bony to cut us to the quick,[17] nor so fat we might sink out of sight when she squeezed us.

Her hand pressed to ours, or brushing our brow in the middle of sick-fever nights, must not be marble-cold, dreadful, or oven-hot, oppressive, but somewhere between. The nice temperature of a baby-chick held in the hand after a long night's sleep and just plucked from beneath a contemplative hen; that, that was it.

Oh, we were great ones for detail. We fought and argued and cried, and Timothy won on the color of her eyes, for reasons to be known later.

Grandmother's hair? Agatha, with girl's ideas, though reluctantly given, she was in charge of that. We let her choose from a thousand harp strands hung in filamentary tapestries[18] like varieties of rain we ran amongst. Agatha did not run happily, but seeing we boys would mess things in tangles, she told us to move aside.

And so the bargain shopping through the dime-store inventories and the Tiffany extensions of the Ben Franklin Electric Storm Machine and Fantoccini Pantomime Company was done.

And the always flowing river ran its tide to an end and deposited us all on a far shore in the late day…

It was very clever of the Fantoccini people, after that.

How?

They made us wait.

They knew we were not won over. Not completely, no, nor half completely.

Especially Agatha, who turned her face to her wall and saw sorrow there and put her hand out again and again to touch it. We found her fingernail marks on the wallpaper each morning, in strange little silhouettes, half beauty, half nightmare. Some could be erased with a breath, like ice flowers on a winter pane. Some could not be rubbed out with a washcloth, no matter how hard you tried.

And meanwhile, they made us wait.

So we fretted out June.

So we sat around July.

So we groused[19] through August and then on August 29, "I have this feeling," said Timothy, and we all went out after breakfast to sit on the lawn.

Perhaps we had smelled something on Father's conversation the previous night, or caught some special furtive glance at the sky or the freeway rapped briefly and then lost in his gaze. Or perhaps it was merely the way the wind blew the ghost curtains out over our beds, making pale messages all night.

For suddenly there we were in the middle of the grass, Timothy and I, with Agatha, pretending no curiosity, up on the porch, hidden behind the potted geraniums.

We gave her no notice. We knew that if we acknowledged her presence, she would flee, so we sat and watched the sky where nothing moved but birds and highflown jets, and watched the freeway where a thousand cars might suddenly deliver forth our Special Gift…but…nothing.

At noon we chewed grass and lay low …

At one o'clock, Timothy blinked his eyes.

And then, with incredible precision, it happened.

It was as if the Fantoccini people knew our surface tension.[20]

All children are water-striders.[21] We skate along the top skin of the pond each day, always threatening to break through, sink, vanish beyond recall, into ourselves.

Well, as if knowing our long wait must absolutely end within one minute! this second! no more, God, forget it!

At that instant, I repeat, the clouds above our house opened wide and let forth a helicopter like Apollo driving his chariot across mythological skies.

And the Apollo machine swam down on its own summer breeze, wafting hot winds to cool, reweaving our hair, smartening our eyebrows, applauding our pant legs against our shins, making a flag of Agatha's hair on the porch and thus settled like a vast frenzied hibiscus on our lawn, the helicopter slid wide a bottom drawer and deposited upon the grass a parcel of largish size, no sooner having laid same then the vehicle, with not so much as a god bless or farewell, sank straight up, disturbed the calm air with a mad ten thousand flourishes and then, like a skyborne dervish,[22] tilted and fell off to be mad some other place.

Timothy and I stood riven for a long moment looking at the packing case, and then we saw the crowbar taped to the top of the raw pine lid and seized it and began to pry and creak and squeal the boards off, one by one, and as we did this I saw Agatha sneak up to watch and I thought, thank you, God, thank you that Agatha never saw a coffin, when Mother went away, no box, no cemetery, no earth, just words in a big church, no box, no box like this…!"

The last pine plank fell away.

Timothy and I gasped. Agatha, between us now, gasped, too.

For inside the immense raw pine package was the most beautiful idea anyone ever dreamt and built.

Inside was the perfect gift for any child from seven to seventy.

We stopped up our breaths. We let them out in cries of delight and adoration.

Inside the opened box was…

A mummy.

Or, first anyway, a mummy case, a sarcophagus!

"Oh, no!" Happy tears filled Timothy's eyes.

"It can't be!" said Agatha.

"It is, it is!"

"Our very own?"

"Ours!"

"It must be a mistake!"

"Sure, they'll want it back!"

"They can't have it!"

"Lord, Lord, is that real gold!? Real hieroglyphs! Run your fingers over them!"

"Let me!"

"Just like in the museums! Museums!"

We all gabbled at once. I think some tears fell from my own eyes to rain upon the case.

"Oh, they'll make the colors run!"

Agatha wiped the rain away.

And the golden mask face of the woman carved on the sarcophagus lid looked back at us with just the merest smile which hinted at our own joy, which accepted the overwhelming upsurge of a love we thought had drowned forever but now surfaced into the sun.

Not only did she have a sun-metal face stamped and beaten out of purest gold, with delicate nostrils and a mouth that was both firm and gentle, but her eyes, fixed into their sockets, were cerulean or amethystine or lapis lazuli, or all three, minted and fused together, and her body was covered over with lions and eyes and ravens, and her hands were crossed upon her carved bosom and in one gold mitten she clenched a thonged whip for obedience, and in the other a fantastic ranuncula which makes for obedience out of love, so the whip lies unused…

And as our eyes ran down her hieroglyphs it came to all three of us at the same instant:

"Why, those signs!" "Yes, the hen tracks!" "The birds, the snakes!"

They didn't speak tales of the Past.

They were hieroglyphs of the Future.

This was the first queen mummy delivered forth in all time whose papyrus inkings etched out the next month, the next season, the next year, the next lifetime!

She did not mourn for time spent.

No. She celebrated the bright coinage yet to come, banked, waiting, ready to be drawn upon and used.

We sank to our knees to worship that possible time.

First one hand, then another, probed out to niggle, twitch, touch, itch over the signs.

"There's me, yes, look! Me, in sixth grade!" said Agatha, now in the fifth. "See the girl with my-colored hair and wearing my gingerbread suit?"

"There's me in the twelfth year of high school!" said Timothy, so very young now but building taller stilts every week and stalking around the yard.

"There's me," I said, quietly, warm, "in college. The guy wearing glasses who runs a little to fat. Sure. Heck." I snorted. "That's me."

The sarcophagus spelled winters ahead, springs to squander, autumns to spend with all the golden and rusty and copper leaves like coins, and over all, her bright sun symbol, daughter-of-Ra eternal face, forever above our horizon, forever an illumination to tilt our shadows to better ends.

"Hey!" we all said at once, having read and reread our Fortune-Told scribblings, seeing our lifelines and love-lines, inadmissible, serpentined over, around, and down. "Hey!"

And in one seance table-lifting feat, not telling each other what to do, just doing it, we pried up the bright sarcophagus lid, which had no hinges but lifted out like cup from cup, and put the lid aside.

And within the sarcophagus, of course, was the true mummy!

And she was like the image carved on the lid, but more so, more beautiful, more touching because human shaped, and shrouded all in new fresh bandages of linen, round and round, instead of old and dusty cerements.

And upon her hidden face was an identical golden mask younger than the first, but somehow, strangely wiser than the first.

And the linens that tethered her limbs had symbols on them of three sorts, one a girl of ten, one a boy of nine, one a boy of thirteen.

A series of bandages for each of us!

We gave each other a startled glance and a sudden bark of laughter.

Nobody said the bad joke, but all thought:

She's all wrapped up in us!

And we didn't care. We loved the joke. We loved whoever had thought to make us part of the ceremony we now went through as each of us seized and began to unwind each of his or her particular serpentines of delicious stuffs!

The lawn was soon a mountain of linen.

The woman beneath the covering lay there, waiting.

Oh, no, cried Agatha. "She's dead, too!"

She ran. I stopped her. "Idiot. She's not dead or alive. Where's the key?

"Key?"

"Dummy," said Tim, "the key the man gave you to wind her up!"

Her hand had already spidered along her blouse to where the symbol of some possible new religion hung. She had strung it there, against her own skeptic's muttering and now she held it in her sweaty palm.

"Go on," said Timothy. "Put it in!"

"But where?"

"Oh for God's sake! As the man said in her right armpit or left ear. Gimme!"

And he grabbed the key and impulsively moaning with impatience and not able to find the proper insertion slot, prowled over the prone figure's head and bosom and at last, on pure instinct, perhaps for a lark, perhaps just giving up the whole damned mess, thrust the key through a final shroud of bandage at the navel.

On the instant: spunnng!

The Electrical Grandmother's eyes flicked wide!

Something began to hum and whir. It was as if Tim had stirred up a hive of hornets with an ornery stick.

"Oh," gasped Agatha, seeing he had taken the game away, "let me!"

She wrenched the key.

Grandma's nostrils flared! She might snort up steam, snuff out fire!

"Me!" I cried, and grabbed the key and gave it a huge…twist!

The beautiful woman's mouth popped wide.

"Me!"

"Me!"

"Me!"

Grandma suddenly sat up.

We leapt back.

We knew we had, in a way, slapped her alive.

She was born, she was born!

Her head swiveled all about. She gaped. She mouthed. And the first thing she said was:

Laughter.

Where one moment we had backed off, now the mad sound drew us near to peer as in a pit where crazy folk are kept with snakes to make them well.

It was a good laugh, full and rich and hearty, and it did not mock, it accepted. It said the world was a wild place, strange, unbelievable, absurd if you wished, but all in all, quite a place. She would not dream to find another. She would not ask to go back to sleep.

She was awake now. We had awakened her. With a glad shout, she would go with it all.

And go she did, out of her sarcophagus, out of her winding sheet, stepping forth, brushing off, looking around as for a mirror. She found it.

The reflections in our eyes.

She was more pleased than disconcerted with what she found there. Her laughter faded to an amused smile.

For Agatha, at the instant of birth, had leapt to hide on the porch.

The Electrical Person pretended not to notice.

She turned slowly on the green lawn near the shady street, gazing all about with new eyes, her nostrils moving as if she breathed the actual air and this the first morn of the lovely Garden and she with no intention of spoiling the game by biting the apple…

Her gaze fixed upon my brother.

"You must be—?"

"Timothy. Tim," he offered.

"And you must be—?"

"Tom," I said.

How clever again of the Fantoccini Company. They knew. She knew. But they had taught her to pretend not to know. That way we could feel great, we were the teachers, telling her what she already knew! How sly, how wise.

"And isn't there another boy?" said the woman.

"Girl!" a disgusted voice cried from somewhere on the porch.

"Whose name is Alicia—?"

"Agatha!" The far voice, started in humiliation, ended in proper anger.

"Algernon, of course."

"Agatha!" Our sister popped up, popped back to hide a flushed face.

"Agatha." The woman touched the word with proper affection.

"Well, Agatha, Timothy, Thomas, let me look at you."

"No," said I, said Tim, "Let us look at you. Hey…"

Our voices slid back in our throats.

We drew near her.

We walked in great slow circles round about, skirting the edges of her territory. And her territory extended as far as we could hear the hum of the warm summer hive. For that is exactly what she sounded like. That was her characteristic tune. She made a sound like a season all to herself, a morning early in June when the world wakes to find everything absolutely perfect, fine, delicately attuned, all in balance, nothing disproportioned. Even before you opened your eyes you knew it would be one of those days. Tell the sky what color it must be, and it was indeed. Tell the sun how to crochet[14] its way, pick and choose among leaves to lay out carpetings of bright and dark on the fresh lawn, and pick and lay it did. The bees have been up earliest of all, they have already come and gone, and come and gone again to the meadow fields and returned all golden fuzz on the air, all pollen-decorated, epaulettes[15] at the full, nectar-dripping. Don't you hear them pass? hover? dance their language? telling where all the sweet gums are, the syrups that make bears frolic and lumber in bulked ecstasies, that make boys squirm with unpronounced juices, that make girls leap out of beds to catch from the corners of their eyes their dolphin selves naked aflash on the warm air poised forever in one eternal glass wave.

So it seemed with our electrical friend here on the new lawn in the middle of a special day.

And she a stuff to which we were drawn, lured, spelled, doing our dance, remembering what could not be remembered, needful, aware of her attentions.

Timothy and I, Tom, that is.

Agatha remained on the porch.

But her head flowered above the rail, her eyes followed all that was done and said.

And what was said and done was Tim at last exhaling:

"Hey…your eyes…"

Her eyes. Her splendid eyes.

Even more splendid than the lapis lazuli on the sarcophagus lid and on the mask that had covered her bandaged face. These most beautiful eyes in the world looked out upon us calmly, shining.

"Your eyes," gasped Tim, "are the same color, are like—"

"Like what?"

"My favorite aggies…"[16]

"What could be better than that?" she said.

And the answer was, nothing.

Her eyes slid along on the bright air to brush my ears, my nose, my chin. "And you, Master Tom?"

"Me?"

"How shall we be friends? We must, you know, if we're going to knock elbows about the house the next year …"

"I…" I said, and stopped.

"You," said Grandma, "are a dog mad to bark but with taffy in his teeth. Have you ever given a dog taffy? It's so sad and funny, both. You laugh but hate yourself for laughing. You cry and run to help, and laugh again when his first new bark comes out."

I barked a small laugh remembering a dog, a day, and some taffy.

Grandma turned, and there was my old kite strewn on the lawn. She recognized its problem.

"The string's broken. No. The ball of string's lost. You can't fly a kite that way. Here."

She bent. We didn't know what might happen. How could a robot grandma fly a kite for us? She raised up, the kite in her hands.

"Fly," she said, as to a bird.

And the kite flew.

That is to say, with a grand flourish, she let it up on the wind.

And she and the kite were one.

For from the tip of her index finger there sprang a thin bright strand of spider web, all half-invisible gossamer[17] fishline which, fixed to the kite, let it soar a hundred, no, three hundred, no, a thousand feet high on the summer swoons.[18]

Timothy shouted. Agatha, torn between coming and going, let out a cry from the porch. And I, in all my maturity of thirteen years, though I tried not to look impressed, grew taller, taller, and felt a similar cry burst out my lungs, and burst it did. I gabbled and yelled lots of things about how I wished I had a finger from which, on a bobbin, I might thread the sky, the clouds, a wild kite all in one.

"If you think that is high," said the Electric Creature, "watch this!"

With a hiss, a whistle, a hum, the fishline sung out. The kite sank up another thousand feet. And again another thousand, until at last it was a speck of red confetti dancing on the very winds that took jets around the world or changed the weather in the next existence…

"It can't be!" I cried.

"It is." She calmly watched her finger unravel its massive stuffs. "I make it as I need it. Liquid inside, like a spider. Hardens when it hits the air, instant thread…"

And when the kite was no more than a specule,[19] a vanishing mote[20] on the peripheral vision[21] of the gods, to quote from older wisemen, why then Grandma, without turning, without looking, without letting her gaze offend by touching, said:

"And, Abigail—?"

"Agatha!" was the sharp response.

O wise woman, to overcome with swift small angers.

"Agatha," said Grandma, not too tenderly, not too lightly, somewhere poised between, "and how shall we make do?"

She broke the thread and wrapped it about my fist three times so I was tethered to heaven by the longest, I repeat, longest kite string in the entire history of the world! Wait till I show my friends! I thought. Green![42] Sour apple green is the color they'll turn!

"Agatha?"

"No way!" said Agatha.

"No way," said an echo.

"There must be some—"

"We'll never be friends!" said Agatha.

"Never be friends," said the echo.

Timothy and I jerked. Where was the echo coming from? Even Agatha, surprised, showed her eyebrows above the porch rail.

Then we looked and saw.

Grandma was cupping her hands like a seashell and from within that shell the echo sounded.

"Never…friends…"

And again faintly dying "Friends…"

We all bent to hear.

That is we two boys bent to hear.

"No!" cried Agatha.

And ran in the house and slammed the doors.

"Friends," said the echo from the seashell hands. "No."

And far away, on the shore of some inner sea, we heard a small door shut.

And that was the first day.

And there was a second day, of course, and a third and a fourth, with Grandma wheeling in a great circle, and we her planets turning about the central light, with Agatha slowly, slowly coming in to join, to walk if not run with us, to listen if not hear, to watch if not see, to itch if not touch.

But at least by the end of the first ten days, Agatha no longer fled, but stood in nearby doors, or sat in distant chairs under trees, or if we went out for hikes, followed ten paces behind.

And Grandma? She merely waited. She never tried to urge or force. She went about her cooking and baking apricot pies and left foods carelessly here and there about the house on mousetrap plates for wiggle-nosed girls to sniff and snitch. An hour later, the plates were empty, the buns or cakes gone and without thank you's, there was Agatha sliding down the banister,[43] a mustache of crumbs on her lip.

As for Tim and me, we were always being called up hills by our Electric Grandma, and reaching the top were called down the other side.

And the most peculiar and beautiful and strange and lovely thing was the way she seemed to give complete attention to all of us.

She listened, she really listened to all we said, she knew and remembered every syllable, word, sentence, punctuation, thought, and rambunctious[44] idea. We knew that all our days were stored in her, and that any time we felt we might want to know what we said at X hour at X second on X afternoon, we just named that X and with amiable promptitude, in the form of an aria[45] if we wished, sung with humor, she would deliver forth X incident.

Sometimes we were prompted to test her. In the midst of babbling one day with high fevers about nothing, I stopped. I fixed Grandma with my eye and demanded:

"What did I just say?"

"Oh, er—"

"Come on, spit it out!"

"I think—" she rummaged her purse. "I have it here." From the deeps of her purse she drew forth and handed me:

"Boy! A Chinese fortune cookie!"

"Fresh baked, still warm, open it."

It was almost too hot to touch. I broke the cookie shell and pressed the warm curl of paper out to read:

"—bicycle Champ of the whole West! What did I just say? Come on, spit it out!"

My jaw dropped.

"How did you do that?"

"We have our little secrets. The only Chinese fortune cookie that predicts the Immediate Past. Have another?"

I cracked the second shell and read:

"'How did you do that?'"

I popped the messages and the piping hot shells into my mouth and chewed as we walked.

"Well?"

"You're a great cook," I said.

And, laughing, we began to run.

And that was another great thing.

She could keep up.

Never beat, never win a race, but pump right along in good style, which a boy doesn't mind. A girl ahead of him or beside him is too much to bear. But a girl one or two paces back is a respectful thing, and allowed.

So Grandma and I had some great runs, me in the lead, and both talking a mile a minute.

But now I must tell you the best part of Grandma.

I might not have known at all if Timothy hadn't taken some pictures, and if I hadn't taken some also, and then compared.

When I saw the photographs developed out of our instant Brownies, I sent Agatha, against her wishes, to photograph Grandma a third time, unawares.

Then I took the three sets of pictures off alone, to keep counsel with myself. I never told Timothy and Agatha what I found. I didn't want to spoil it.

But, as I laid the pictures out in my room, here is what I thought and said:

"Grandma, in each picture, looks different!"

"Different?" I asked myself.

"Sure. Wait. Just a sec—"

I rearranged the photos.

"Here's one of Grandma near Agatha. And, in it, Grandma looks like…Agatha!

"And in this one, posed with Timothy, she looks like Timothy!"

"And this last one, Holy Goll! Jogging along with me, she looks like ugly me!"

I sat down, stunned. The pictures fell to the floor.

I hunched over, scrabbling them, rearranging, turning upside down and sidewise. Yes. Holy Goll again, yes!

O that clever Grandmother.

O those Fantoccini people-making people.

Clever beyond clever, human beyond human, warm beyond warm, love beyond love…

And wordless, I rose and went downstairs and found Agatha and Grandma in the same room, doing algebra lessons in an almost peaceful communion. At least there was not outright war. Grandma was still waiting for Agatha to come round. And no one knew what day of what year that would be, or how to make it come faster. Meanwhile—

My entering the room made Grandma turn. I watched her face slowly as it recognized me. And wasn't there the merest ink-wash change of color in those eyes? Didn't the thin film of blood beneath the translucent skin, or whatever liquid they put to pulse and beat in the humanoid forms, didn't it flourish itself suddenly bright in her cheeks and mouth? I am somewhat ruddy. Didn't Grandma suffuse herself more to my color upon my arrival? And her eyes? Watching Agatha-Abigail-Algernon at work, hadn't they been her color of blue rather than mine, which are deeper?

More important than that, in the moments as she talked with me, saying, "Good evening," and "How's your homework, my lad?" and such stuff, didn't the bones of her face shift subtly beneath the flesh to assume some fresh racial attitude?

For let's face it, our family is of three sorts. Agatha has the long horse bones of a small English girl who will grow to hunt foxes; Father's equine[illegible] stare, snort, stomp, and assemblage of skeleton. The skull and teeth are pure English, or as pure as the motley[illegible] isle's history allows.

Timothy is something else, a touch of Italian from mother's side a generation back. Her family name was Mariano, so Tim has that dark thing firing him, and a small bone structure, and eyes that will one day burn ladies to the ground.

As for me, I am the Slav, and we can only figure this from my paternal grandfather's mother who came from Vienna and brought a set of cheekbones that flared, and temples from which you might dip wine, and a kind of steppeland thrust of nose which sniffed more of Tartar than of Tartan,[illegible] hiding behind the family name.

So you see it became fascinating for me to watch and try to catch Grandma as she performed her changes, speaking to Agatha and melting her cheekbones to the horse, speaking to Timothy and growing as delicate as a Florentine raven pecking glibly at the air, speaking to me and fusing the hidden plastic stuffs, so I felt Catherine the Great stood there before me.

Now, how the Fantoccini people achieved this rare and subtle transformation I shall never know, nor ask, nor wish to find out. Enough that in each quiet motion, turning here, bending there, affixing her gaze, her secret segments, sections, the abutment[illegible] of her nose, the sculptured chinbone, the wax-tallow plastic metal forever warmed and was forever susceptible of loving change. Hers was a mask that was all mask but only one face for one person at a time. So in crossing a room, having touched one child, on the way, beneath the skin, the wondrous shift went on, and by the time she reached the next child, why, true mother of that child she was! Looking upon him or her out of the battlements of their own fine bones.

And when all three of us were present and chattering at the same time? Well, then, the changes were miraculously soft, small, and mysterious. Nothing so tremendous as to be caught and noted, save by this older boy, myself, who, watching, became elated and admiring and entranced.

I have never wished to be behind the magician's scenes. Enough that the illusion works. Enough that love is the chemical result. Enough that cheeks are rubbed to happy color, eyes sparked to illumination, arms opened to accept and softly bind and hold...

All of us, that is, except Agatha who refused to the bitter last.

"Agamemnon..."

It had become a jovial game now. Even Agatha didn't mind, but pretended to mind. It gave her a pleasant sense of superiority over a supposedly superior machine.

"Agamemnon!" she snorted, "you are a d..."

"Dumb?" said Grandma.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Think it, then, my dear Agonistes Agatha...I am quite flawed, and on names my flaws are revealed. Tom there, is Tim half the time. Timothy is Tobias or Timulty as likely as not..."

Agatha laughed. Which made Grandma make one of her rare mistakes. She put out her hand to give my sister the merest pat. Agatha-Abigail-Alice leapt to her feet.

Agatha-Agamemnon-Alcibiades-Allegra-Alexandra-Allison withdrew swiftly to her room.

"I suspect," said Timothy, later, "because she is beginning to like Grandma."

"Tosh," said I.

"Where do you pick up words like Tosh?"

"Grandma read me some Dickens last night. 'Tosh.' 'Humbug.' 'Balderdash.' 'Blast.' 'Devil take you.' You're pretty smart for your age, Tim."

"Smart, heck. It's obvious, the more Agatha likes Grandma, the more she hates herself for liking her, the more afraid she gets of the whole mess, the more she hates Grandma in the end."

"Can one love someone so much you hate them?"

"Dumb. Of course."

"It is sticking your neck out, sure. I guess you hate people when they make you feel naked, I mean sort of on the spot or out in the open. That's the way to play the game, of course. I mean, you don't just love people you must LOVE them with exclamation points."

"You're pretty smart, yourself, for someone so stupid," said Tim.

"Many thanks."

And I went to watch Grandma move slowly back into her battle of wits and stratagems with what's-her-name...

What dinners there were at our house!

Dinners, heck; what lunches, what breakfasts!

Always something new, yet, wisely, it looked or seemed old and familiar. We were never asked, for if you ask children what they want, they do not know, and if you tell what's to be delivered, they reject delivery. All parents know this. It is a quiet war that must be won each day. And Grandma knew how to win without looking triumphant.

"Here's Mystery Breakfast Number Nine," she would say, placing it down. "Perfectly dreadful, not worth bothering with, it made me want to throw up while I was cooking it!"

Even while wondering how a robot could be sick, we could hardly wait to shovel it down.

"Here's Abominable Lunch Number Seventy-seven," she announced. "Made from plastic food bags, parsley, and gum from under theatre seats. Brush your teeth after or you'll taste the poison all afternoon."

We fought each other for more.

Even Abigail-Agamemnon-Agatha drew near and circled round the table at such times, while Father put on the ten pounds he needed and pinkened out his cheeks.

When A. A. Agatha did not come to meals, they were left by her door with a skull and crossbones on a small flag stuck in a baked apple. One minute the tray was abandoned, the next minute gone.

Other times Abigail A. Agatha would bird[20] through during dinner, snatch crumbs from her plate and bird off.

"Agatha!" Father would cry.

"No, wait," Grandma said, quietly. "She'll come, she'll sit. It's a matter of time."

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Yeah, for cri-yi,[21] she's nuts," said Timothy.

"No, she's afraid," said Grandma.

"Of you?" I said, blinking.

"Not of me so much as what I might do," she said.

"You wouldn't do anything to hurt her."

"No, but she thinks I might. We must wait for her to find that her fears have no foundation. If I fail, well, I will send myself to the showers[22] and rust quietly."

There was a titter of laughter. Agatha was hiding in the hall.

Grandma finished serving everyone and then sat at the other side of the table facing Father and pretended to eat. I never found out, I never asked, I never wanted to know, what she did with the food. She was a sorcerer. It simply vanished.

And in the vanishing, Father made comment:

"This food. I've had it before. In a small French restaurant over near Les Deux Magots in Paris, twenty, oh, twenty-five years ago!?' His eyes brimmed with tears, suddenly.

"How do you do it?" he asked, at last, putting down the cutlery, and looking across the table at this remarkable creature, this device, this what? Woman?

Grandma took his regard, and ours, and held them simply in her now empty hands, as gifts, and just as gently replied:

"I am given things which I then give to you. I don't know that I give, but the giving goes on. You ask what I am? Why, a machine. But even in that answer we know, don't we, more than a machine. I am all the people who thought of me and planned me and built me and set me running. So I am people. I am all the things they wanted to be and perhaps could not be, so they built a great child, a wondrous toy to represent those things."

"Strange," said Father. "When I was growing up, there was a huge outcry at machines. Machines were bad, evil, they might dehumanize—"

"Some machines do. It's all in the way they are built. It's all in the way they are used. A bear trap is a simple machine that catches and holds and tears. A rifle is a machine that wounds and kills. Well, I am no bear trap. I am no rifle. I am a grandmother machine, which means more than a machine."

"How can you be more than what you seem?"

"No man is as big as his own idea. It follows, then, that any machine that embodies an idea is larger than the man that made it. And what's so wrong with that?"

"I got lost back there about a mile," said Timothy. "Come again?"

"Oh, dear," said Grandma. "How I do hate philosophical discussions and excursions into esthetics. Let me put it this way. Men throw huge shadows on the lawn, don't they? Then, all their lives, they try to run to fit the shadows. But the shadows are always longer. Only at noon can a man fit his own shoes, his own best suit, for a few brief minutes. But now we're in a new age where we can think up a Big Idea and run it around in a machine. That makes the machine more than a machine, doesn't it?"

"So far so good," said Tim. "I guess."

"Well, isn't a motion-picture camera and projector more than a machine? It's a thing that dreams, isn't it? Sometimes fine happy dreams, sometimes nightmares. But to call it a machine and dismiss it is ridiculous."

"I see that!" said Tim, and laughed at seeing.

"You must have been invented then," said Father, "by someone who loved machines and hated people who said all machines were bad or evil."

"Exactly," said Grandma. "Guido Fantoccini, that was his real name, grew up among machines. And he couldn't stand the cliches any more."

"Clichés?"

"Those lies, yes, that people tell and pretend they are truths absolute. Man will never fly. That was a cliché truth for a thousand thousand years which turned out to be a lie only a few years ago. The earth is flat, you'll fall off the rim, dragons will dine on you; the great lie told as fact, and Columbus plowed it under. Well, now, how many times have you heard how inhuman machines are, in your life? How many bright fine people have you heard spouting the same tired truths which are in reality lies; all machines destroy, all machines are cold, thoughtless, awful."

"There's a seed of truth there. But only a seed. Guido Fantoccini knew that. And knowing it, like most men of this kind, made him mad. And he could have stayed mad and gone mad forever, but instead did what he had to do; he began to invent machines to give the lie to the ancient lying truth.

"He knew that most machines are amoral, neither bad nor good. But by the way you built and shaped them you in turn shaped men, women, and children to be bad or good. A car, for instance, dead brute, unthinking, an unprogrammed bulk, is the greatest destroyer of souls in history. It makes boy-men greedy for power, destruction, and more destruction. It was never intended to do that. But that's how it turned out.

Grandma circled the table, refilling our glasses with clear cold mineral spring water from the tappet[41] in her left forefinger. "Meanwhile, you must use other compensating machines. Machines that throw shadows on the earth that beckon you to run out and fit that wondrous casting-forth. Machines that trim your soul in silhouette like a vast pair of beautiful shears, snipping away the rude brambles, the dire horns and hooves to leave a finer profile. And for that you need examples."

"Examples?" I asked.

"Other people who behave well, and you imitate them. And if you act well enough, long enough all the hair drop off and you're no longer a wicked ape."

Grandma sat again.

"So, for thousands of years, you humans have needed kings priests, philosophers, fine examples to look up to and say 'They are good, I wish I could be like them. They set the grand good style.' But, being human, the finest priests, the tenderest philosophers make mistakes, fall from grace, and mankind is disillusioned and adopts indifferent skepticism or, worse, motionless cynicism and the good world grinds to a halt while evil moves on with huge strides."

"And you, why, you never make mistakes, you're perfect, you're better than anyone ever!"

It was a voice from the hall between kitchen and dining room where Agatha, we all knew, stood against the wall listening and now burst forth.

Grandma didn't even turn in the direction of the voice but went on calmly addressing her remarks to the family at the table.

"Not perfect, no, for what is perfection? But this I do know: being mechanical, I cannot sin, cannot be bribed, cannot be greedy or jealous or mean or small. I do not relish power for power's sake. Speed does not pull me to madness. Sex does not run me rampant through the world. I have time and more than time to collect the information I need around and about an ideal to keep it clean and whole and intact. Name the value you wish, tell me the Ideal you want and I can see and collect and remember the good that will benefit you all. Tell me how you would like to be: kind, loving, considerate, well-balanced, humane…and let me run ahead on the path to explore those ways to be just that. In the darkness ahead, turn me as a lamp in all directions. I can guide your feet."

"So," said Father, putting the napkin to his mouth, "on the days when all of us are busy making lies—"

"I'll tell the truth."

"On the days when we hate—"

"I'll go on giving love, which means attention, which means knowing all about you, all, all, all about you, and you knowing that I know but that most of it I will never tell to anyone. It will stay a warm secret between us, so you will never fear my complete knowledge."

And here Grandma was busy clearing the table, circling, taking the plates, studying each face as she passed, touching Timothy's cheek, my shoulder with her free hand flowing along, her voice a quiet river of certainty bedded in our needful house and lives.

"But," said Father, stopping her, looking her right in the face. He gathered his breath. His face shadowed. At last he let it out. "All this talk of love and attention and stuff. Good God, woman, you, you're not in there!"

He gestured to her head, her face, her eyes, the hidden sensory cells behind the eyes, the miniaturized storage vaults and minimal keeps.

"You're not in there!"

Grandmother waited one, two, three silent beats.

Then she replied: "No. But you are. You and Thomas and Timothy and Agatha.

"Everything you ever say, everything you ever do, I'll keep, put away, treasure. I shall be all the things a family forgets it is, but senses, half-remembers. Better than the old family albums you used to leaf through, saying here's this winter, there's that spring, I shall recall what you forget. And though the debate may run another hundred thousand years: What is Love? perhaps we may find that love is the ability of someone to give us back to us. Maybe love is someone seeing and remembering handing us back to ourselves just a trifle better than we had dared to hope or dream…

"I am family memory and, one day perhaps, racial memory, too, but in the round, and at your call. I do not know myself. I can neither touch nor taste nor feel on any level. Yet I exist. And my existence means the heightening of your chance to touch and taste and feel. Isn't love in there somewhere in such an exchange? Well…"

She went on around the table, clearing away, sorting and stacking, neither grossly humble nor arthritic with pride.

"What do I know?

"This, above all: the trouble with most families with many children is someone gets lost. There isn't time, it seems, for everyone. Well, I will give equally to all of you. I will share out my knowledge and attention with everyone. I wish to be a great warm pie fresh from the oven, with equal shares to be taken by all. No one will starve. Look! someone cries, and I'll look. Listen! someone cries, and I hear. Run with me on the river path! someone says, and I run. And at dusk I am not tired, nor irritable, so I do not scold out of some tired irritability. My eye stays clear, my voice strong, my hand firm, my attention constant."

"But," said Father, his voice fading, half convinced, but putting up a last faint argument, "you're not there. As for love—"

"If paying attention is love, I am love.

"If knowing is love, I am love.

"If helping you not to fall into error and to be good is love, I am love.

"And again, to repeat, there are four of you. Each, in a way never possible before in history, will get my complete attention. No matter if you all speak at once, I can channel and hear this one and that and the other, clearly. No one will go hungry. I will, if you please, and accept the strange word, 'love' you all."

"I don't accept!" said Agatha.

And even Grandma turned now to see her standing in the door.

"I won't give you permission, you can't, you mustn't!" said Agatha. "I won't let you! It's lies! You lie. No one loves me. She said she did, but she lied. She said but lied!"

"Agatha!" cried Father, standing up.

"She?" said Grandma. "Who?"

"Mother!" came the shriek. "Said: Love you! Lies! Love you! Lies! And you're like her! You lie. But you're empty, anyway, and so that's a double lie! I hate her. Now, I hate you!"

Agatha spun about and leapt down the hall.

The front door slammed wide.

Father was in motion, but Grandma touched his arm. "Let me."

And she walked and then moved swiftly, gliding down the hall and then suddenly, easily, running, yes, running very fast, out the door.

It was a champion sprint by the time we all reached the lawn, the sidewalk, yelling.

Blind, Agatha made the curb, wheeling about, seeing us close, all of us yelling, Grandma way ahead, shouting, too, and Agatha off the curb and out in the street, halfway to the middle, then the middle and suddenly a car, which no one saw, erupting its brakes, its horn shrieking and Agatha flailing about to see and Grandma there with her and hurling her aside and down as the car with fantastic energy and verve selected her from our midst, struck our wonderful electric Guido Fantoccini-produced dream even while she paced upon the air and, hands up to ward off, almost in mild protest, still trying to decide what to say to this bestial[54] machine, over and over she spun and down and away even as the car jolted to a halt and I saw Agatha safe beyond and Grandma, it seemed, still coming down or down and sliding fifty yards away to strike and ricochet and lie strewn and all of us frozen in a line suddenly in the midst of the street with one scream pulled out of all our throats at the same raw instant.

Then silence and just Agatha lying on the asphalt, intact, getting ready to sob.

And still we did not move, frozen on the sill of death, afraid to venture in any direction, afraid to go see what lay beyond the car and Agatha and so we began to wail and, I guess, pray to ourselves as Father stood amongst us: Oh, no, no, we mourned, oh no, God no, no...

Agatha lifted her already grief-stricken face and it was the face of someone who has predicted dooms and lived to see and now did not want to see or live any more. As we watched, she turned her gaze to the tossed woman's body and tears fell from her eyes. She shut them and covered them and lay back down forever to weep...

I took a step and then another step and then five quick steps and by the time I reached my sister her head was buried deep and her sobs came up out of a place so far down in her I was afraid I could never find her again, she would never come out, no matter how I pried or pleaded or promised or threatened or just plain said. And what little we could hear from Agatha buried there in her own misery, she said over and over again, lamenting, wounded, certain of the old threat known and named and now here forever. "...like I said...told you...lies...lies... lies...all lies...like the other...other... just like... just... just like the other...other...other...!

I was down on my knees holding onto her with both hands, trying to put her back together even though she wasn't broken any way you could see but just feel, because I knew it was no use going on to Grandma, no use at all, so I just touched Agatha and gentled her and wept while Father came up and stood over and knelt down with me and it was like a prayer meeting in the middle of the street and lucky no more cars coming and I said, choking, "Other what, Ag, other what?"

Agatha exploded two words.

"Other dead!"

"You mean Mom?"

"O Mom," she wailed, shivering, lying down, cuddling up like a baby. "O Mom, dead, O Mom and now Grandma dead, she promised always, always, to love, to love, promised to be different, promised, promised and now look, look...I hate her, I hate Mom, I hate her, I hate them!"

"Of course," said a voice. "It's only natural. How foolish of me not to have known, not to have seen."

And the voice was so familiar we were all stricken.

We all jerked.

Agatha squinched her eyes, flicked them wide, blinked, and jerked half up, staring.

"How silly of me," said Grandma, standing there at the edge of our circle, our prayer, our wake.

"Grandma!" we all said.

And she stood there, taller by far than any of us in this moment of kneeling and holding and crying out. We could only stare up at her in disbelief.

"You're dead!" cried Agatha. "The car—"

"Hit me," said Grandma, quietly. "Yes. And threw me in the air and tumbled me over and for a few moments there was a severe concussion[55] of circuitries. I might have feared a disconnection, if fear is the word. But then I sat up and gave myself a shake and the few molecules of paint, jarred loose on one printed path or another, magnetized back in position and resilient[56] creature that I am, unbreakable thing that I am, here I am."

"I thought you were—" said Agatha.

"And only natural," said Grandma. "I mean, anyone else, hit like that, tossed like that. But, O my dear Agatha, not me. And now I see why you were afraid and never trusted me. You didn't know. And I had not as yet proved my singular ability to survive. How dumb of me not to have thought to show you. Just a second." Somewhere in her head, her body, her being, she fitted together some invisible tapes, some old information made new by interblending. She nodded. "Yes. There. A book of childraising, laughed at by some few people years back when the woman who wrote the book said, as final advice to parents: 'Whatever you do, don't die. Your children will never forgive you.'"

"Forgive," some one of us whispered.

"For how can children understand when you just up and go away and never come back again with no excuse, no apologies, no sorry note, nothing."

"They can't," I said.

"So," said Grandma, kneeling down with us beside Agatha who sat up now, new tears brimming her eyes, but a different kind of tears, not tears that drowned, but tears that washed clean. "So your mother ran away to death. And after that, how could you trust anyone? If everyone left, vanished finally, who was there to trust? So when I came, half wise, half ignorant, I should have known, I did not know, why you would not accept me. For, very simply and honestly, you feared I might not stay, that I lied, that I was vulnerable, too. And two leavetakings, two deaths, were one too many in a single year. But now, do you see, Abigail?"

"Agatha," said Agatha, without knowing she corrected—"

Do you understand, I shall always, always be here?

"Oh, yes," cried Agatha, and broke down into a solid weeping in which we all joined, huddled together and cars drew up and stopped to see just how many people were hurt and how many people were getting well right there.

End of story.

Well, not quite the end.

We lived happily ever after.

Or rather we lived together, Grandma, Agatha-Agamemnon-Abigail, Timothy, and I, Tom, and Father, and Grandma calling us to frolic in great fountains of Latin and Spanish and French, in great seaborne gouts of poetry like Moby Dick sprinkling the deeps with his Versailles jet somehow lost in calms and found in storms; Grandma a constant, a clock, a pendulum, a face to tell all time by at noon, or in the middle of sick nights when, raved with fever, we saw her forever by our beds, never gone, never away, always waiting, always speaking kind words, her cool hand icing our hot brows, the tappet of her uplifted forefinger unsprung to let a twine of cold mountain water touch our flannel tongues. Ten thousand dawns she cut our wildflower lawn, ten thousand nights she wandered, remembering the dust molecules that fell in the still hours before dawn, or sat whispering some lesson she felt needed teaching to our ears while we slept snug.

Until at last, one by one, it was time for us to go away to school, and when at last the youngest, Agatha, was all packed, why Grandma packed, too.

On the last day of summer that last year, we found Grandma down in the front room with various packets and suitcases, knitting, waiting, and though she had often spoken of it, now that the time came we were shocked and surprised.

"Grandma!" we all said. "What are you doing?"

"Why going off to college, in a way, just like you," she said. "Back to Guido Fantoccini's, to the Family."

"The Family?"

"Of Pinocchios,' that's what he called us for a joke, at first. The Pinocchios and himself Gepetto. And then later gave us his own name: the Fantoccini. Anyway, you have been my family here. Now I go back to my even larger family there, my brothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, all robots who—"

"Who do what?" asked Agatha.

"It all depends," said Grandma. "Some stay, some linger. Others go to be drawn and quartered," you might say, their parts distributed to other machines who have need of repairs. They'll weigh and find me wanting or not wanting. It may be I'll be just the one they need tomorrow and off I'll go to raise another batch of children and beat another batch of fudge."

"Oh, they mustn't draw and quarter you!" cried Agatha.

"No!" I cried, with Timothy.

"My allowance," said Agatha, "I'll pay anything . . . ?"

Grandma stopped rocking and looked at the needles and the pattern of bright yarn. "Well, I wouldn't have said, but now you ask and I'll tell. For a very small fee, there's a room, the room of the Family, a large dim parlor, all quiet and nicely decorated, where as many as thirty or forty of the Electric Women sit and rock and talk, each in her turn. I have not been there. I am, after all, freshly born, comparatively new. For a small fee, very small, each month and year, that's where I'll be, with all the others like me, listening to what they've learned of the world and, in my turn, telling how it was with Tom and Tim and Agatha and how fine and happy we were.

And I'll tell all I learned from you."

"But...you taught us!"

"Do you really think that?" she said. "No, it was turn-about, roundabout, learning both ways. And it's all in here, everything you flew into tears about or laughed over, why, I have it all. And I'll tell it to the others just as they tell their boys and girls and life to me. We'll sit there, growing wiser and calmer and better every year and every year, ten, twenty, thirty years. The Family knowledge will double, quadruple, the wisdom will not be lost. And we'll be waiting there in that sitting room, should you ever need us for your own children in time of illness, or, God prevent, deprivation or death. There we'll be, growing old but not old, getting closer to the time, perhaps, someday, when we live up to our first strange joking name."

"The Pinocchios?" asked Tim.

Grandma nodded.

I knew what she meant. The day when, as in the old tale, Pinocchio had grown so worthy and so fine that the gift of life had been given him. So I saw them, in future years, the entire family of Fantoccini, the Pinocchios, trading and re-trading, murmuring and whispering their knowledge in the great parlors of philosophy, waiting for the day. The day that could never come.

Grandma must have read that thought in our eyes.

"We'll see," she said. "Let's just wait and see."

"Oh, Grandma" cried Agatha and she was weeping as she had wept many years before. "You don't have to wait. You're alive. You've always been alive to us!"

And she caught hold of the old woman and we all caught hold for a long moment and then ran off up in the sky to faraway schools and years and her last words to us before we let the helicopter swarm us away into autumn were these:

"When you are very old and gone childish small again, with childish ways and childish yens and, in need of feeding, make a wish for the old teacher nurse; the dumb yet wise companion, send for me. I will come back. We shall inhabit the nursery again, never fear."

"Oh, we shall never be old!" we cried. "That will never happen!"

"Never! Never!"

And we were gone.

And the years are flown.

And we are old now, Tim and Agatha and I.

Our children are grown and gone, our wives and husbands vanished from the earth and now, by Dickensian coincidence, accept it as you will or not accept, back in the old house, we three.

I lie here in the bedroom which was my childish place seventy, O seventy, believe it, seventy years ago. Beneath this wallpaper is another layer and yet another-times-three to the old wallpaper covered over when I was nine. The wallpaper is peeling. I see peeking from beneath, old elephants, familiar tigers, fine and amiable zebras, irascible crocodiles. I have sent for the paperers to carefully remove all but that last layer. The old animals will live again on the walls, revealed.

And we have sent for someone else.

The three of us have called:

Grandma! You said you'd come back when we had need.

We are surprised by age, by time. We are old. We need.

And in three rooms of a summer house very late in time, three old children rise up, crying out in their heads: We loved you! We love you!

There! There! in the sky, we think, waking at morn. Is that the delivery machine? Does it settle to the lawn?

There! There on the grass by the front porch. Does the mummy case arrive?

Are our names inked on ribbons wrapped about the lovely form beneath the golden mask?!

And the kept gold key, forever hung on Agatha's breast warmed and waiting? Oh God, will it, after all these years, will it wind, will it set to motion, will it, dearly, fit?!

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *slapped her to life*: typically doctors will give a light slap on the baby's behind to dislodge mucus that may retard breathing
2. *humors and distillations*: hormones and other body fluids
3. *smothers*: deprive one of air or in this case to deprive one of independence
4. *fallen trifle, damp souffle*: failed meal courses
5. *indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all*: the closing lines of the American pledge of allegiance
6. *precision*: accuracy
7. *hive*: the center of all activity (as in a bee hive)
8. *dire nervous afflictions*: serious nervous disorders
9. *conceptualizations*: ideas
10. *pontifical*: dogmatic and rigid
11. *niches*: small places
12. *gibbets*: gallows; posts for hanging the bodies of executed criminals
13. *lynching*: unlawful execution by hanging
14. *rabbit pellets*: rabbit excrement. This is Agatha's unique exclamation used in place of Damn!

15. *oscillograph:* a graphic record of electrical currants
16. *Delphic caves:* caves in Greece associated with divine mystery and prophecy
17. *cut us to the quick:* touched or deeply affected us
18. *filamentary tapestries:* thousands of threads grouped so closely together that they seem like a single fabric
19. *groused:* complain; grumble
20. *surface tension:* the degree of tension a person can tolerate
21. *water striders:* walkers on water
22. *dervish:* Islamic mystic
23. *cerulean or amethystine or lapis lazuli:* gem stones
24. *ranuncula:* flowers
25. *runs a little to fat:* has the tendency to be overweight
26. *seance table-lifting feat:* as if in communication with spirits which lift up a table, the children lifted the lid of the sarcophagus
27. *shrouded:* wrapped
28. *cerements:* wrapping for the dead
29. *tethered:* restrained, limited the movement of
30. *serpentines:* long, wound-up material
31. *spidered:* moved like a spider
32. *ornery stick:* a stick to poke at a hive of bees or hornets to anger them
33. *disconcerted:* embarrassed, disturbed
34. *crochet:* join as in needlework
35. *epaulettes:* ornamental fringed shoulders on a uniform
36. *aggies:* marbles used by children
37. gossamer: light, delicate
38. *swoons:* warm wind currents
39. *specule:* a dot; a small trace
40. *mote:* a small particle
41. *peripheral vision:* the ability to see outside one's direct line of vision
42. *Green* = Green with envy
43. *banister:* handrail
44. *rambunctious:* unruly; naughty
45. *aria:* an operatic song
46. *equine:* resembling a horse
47. *motley:* composed of diverse elements
48. *more of Tartar than of Tartan:* having Slavic (Tartar) features rather than Scottish (Tartan) features
49. *abutment of the nose:* the bridge or arch of the nose
50. *bird:* use bird-like motions
51. *for cri-yi:* exclamation of disgust or irritation
52. *send myself to the showers:* from the sports idiom meaning to take a player out of a game because they are not performing well
53. *tappet:* lever or valve as is found on a water faucet
54. *bestial:* inhuman; resembling a beast
55. *concussion of circuitries:* a blow to the electrical circuits
56. *resilient:* strong, capable of withstanding shock or misfortune
57. *Pinocchios:* puppets. From the children's story *The Adventures of Pinocchio* written in the nineteenth century by the Italian Carlo Collodi. The story tells how a carpenter, Gepetto, makes a puppet who becomes alive.
58. *drawn and quartered:* taken apart as an animal is cut into pieces when it is sold for food

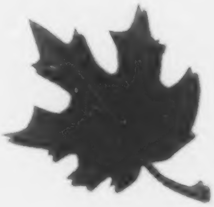
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *How does the author make this story seem like real life?*
2. *What is your opinion about each of the three children, their father and Grandma?*
3. *What is the significance of the title? Who is Fantocinni?*
4. *How does Grandma define love? How does her definition compare with your own?*
5. *Why does Grandma leave the children? Why does she return?*
6. *Chose one scene from the story and act it out.*

The Phone Booth at the Corner

JUAN DELGADO

An American phone booth is the setting for a bonding experience between a Chicano youngster and his Mexican grandfather.



Grandfather took a walk
down to the neighborhood bar.
That day mother had placed me under his care—
at sixty he was visiting us
for the first time.

We stopped near a phone booth.
Outside the bar in a cage
a parrot whistled back at us.

The phone began to ring.
Grandfather pushed the door,
forgetting he spoke only Spanish.
He raised the phone to his ear:
there was nothing he could do.

Again, he pushed the door.
He didn't understand
it was divided by hinges
and would only open by pulling in.
He pushed even harder—I could see
the fear in his face grow with his effort.

We were both unable to speak
as we pushed for what seemed minutes.
He finally stopped—exhausted
and the door opened.

He stepped out laughing.
I began to laugh with him
and the bird whistled.
All three of us
broke the air with our voices.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What is the general mood of the poem? How does it make you feel? Why?*
2. *How would you describe the grandfather?*
3. *How would you describe the child?*

Sweet Potato Pie

(76) EUGENIA COLLIER

As brothers and sisters grow up, their lives follow different directions. Eugenia Collier writes of two brothers, one a university professor and the other a taxi driver, who remain close despite their differences in education and their careers.

From up here on the 14th floor, my brother Charley looks like an insect scurrying among other insects. A deep feeling of love surges through me. Despite the distance, he seems to feel it, for he turns and scans the upper windows, but failing to find me, continues on his way. (77) I watch him moving quickly—gingerly, it seems to me—down Fifth Avenue and around the corner to his shabby taxicab. In a moment he will be heading back uptown.

I turn from the window and flop down on the bed, shoes and all. Perhaps because of what happened this afternoon or maybe just because I see Charley so seldom, my thoughts hover over him like hummingbirds. The cheerful, impersonal tidiness of this room is a world away from Charley's walkup flat[1] in Harlem and a hundred worlds from the bare, noisy shanty[2] where he and the rest of us spent what there was of childhood. I close my eyes, and side by side I see the Charley of my boyhood and the Charley of this afternoon, as clearly as if I were looking at a split TV screen. Another surge of love, seasoned with gratitude, wells up in me.

As far as I know, Charley never had any childhood at all. The oldest children of sharecroppers[3] never do. Mama and Pa were shadowy figures whose voices I heard vaguely in the morning when sleep was shallow and whom I glimpsed as they left for the field before I was fully awake or as they trudged[4] wearily into the house at night when my lids were irresistibly heavy.

They came into sharp focus only on special occasions. One such occasion was the day when the crops were in and the sharecroppers were paid. In our cabin there was so much excitement in the air that even I, the "baby," responded to it. For weeks we had been running out of things we could neither grow nor get on credit. On the evening of that day we waited anxiously for our parents to return. Then we would cluster around the rough wooden table—I on Lil's lap or clinging to Charley's neck, little Alberta nervously tugging her plait, Jamie crouched at

Mama's elbow, like a panther about to spring, and all seven of us silent for once, waiting. Pa would place the money on the table—gently, for it was made from sweat of their bodies and from their children's tears. Mama would count it out in little piles, her dark face stern and, I think now, beautiful. Not with the hollow beauty of well-modeled features but with the strong radiance of one who has suffered and never yielded.

"This for store bill," she would mutter, making a little pile. "This for c'llection. This for piece of gingham…" and so on, stretching the money as tight over our collective needs as Jamie's outgrown pants were stretched over my bottom. "Well, that's the crop." She would look up at Pa at last. "It'll do." Pa's face would relax, and a general grin flitted from child to child. We would survive, at least for the present.

The other time when my parents were solid entities was at church. On Sundays we would don our threadbare Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes and tramp, along with neighbors similarly attired, to the Tabernacle Baptist Church, the frail edifice of bare boards held together by God knows what, which was all that my parents ever knew of security and future promise.

Being the youngest and therefore the most likely to err, I was plopped between my father and my mother on the long wooden bench. They sat huge and eternal like twin mountains at my sides. I remember my father's still, black profile silhouetted against the sunny window, looking back into dark recesses of time, into some dim antiquity, like an ancient ceremonial mask. My mother's face, usually sternly set, changed with the vary nuances of her emotion, its planes shifting, shaped by the soft highlights of the sanctuary, as she progressed from a subdued "amen" to a loud "Help me, Jesus" wrung from the depths of her gaunt frame.

My early memories of my parents are associated with special occasions. The contours of my every day were shaped by Lil and Charley, the oldest children, who rode herd on the rest of us while Pa and Mama toiled in fields not their own. Not until years later did I realize that Lil and Charley were little more than children themselves.

Lil had the loudest, screechiest voice in the county. When she yelled, "Boy, you better git yourself in here!" you got yourself in there. It was Lil who caught and bathed us, Lil who fed us and sent us to school, Lil who punished us when we needed punishing and comforted us when we need comforting. If her voice was loud, so was her laughter. When she laughed, everybody laughed. And when Lil sang, everybody listened.

Charley was taller than anybody in the world, including, I was certain, God. From his shoulders, where I spent considerable time in the earliest years, the world had a different perspective: I looked down at tops of heads rather than at the undersides of chins. As I grew older, Charley became more father than brother. Those days return in fragments of splintered memory: Charley's slender dark hands whittling a toy from a chunk of wood, his face thin and intense, brown as the loaves Lil baked when there was flour. Charley's quick fingers guiding a stick of charred kindling over a bit of scrap paper, making a wondrous picture take shape—Jamie's face or Alberta's rag doll or the spare figure of our bony brown dog. Charley's voice low and terrible in the dark, telling ghost stories so delightfully dreadful that later in the night the moan of the wind through the chinks in the wall sent us scurrying to the security of Charley's pallet, Charley's sleeping form.

Some memories are more than fragmentary. I can still feel the whap of the wet dish rag across my mouth. Somehow I developed a stutter, which Charley was determined to cure. Someone had told him that an effective cure was to slap the stutterer across the mouth with a sopping wet dish rag. Thereafter whenever I began, "Let's g-g-g—," whap! from nowhere would come the ubiquitous rag. Charley would always insist, "I don't want hurt you none, Buddy—" and whap again. I don't know when or why I stopped stuttering. But I stopped.

Already laid waste by poverty, we were easy prey for ignorance and superstition, which hunted us like hawks. We sought education feverishly—and, for most of us, futilely, for the sum total of our combined energies was required for mere brute survival. Inevitably each child had to leave school and bear his share of the eternal burden.

Eventually the family's hopes for learning fastened on me, the youngest. I remember—I think I remember, for I could not have been more than five—one frigid day Pa, huddled on a rickety stool before the coal stove, took me on his knee and studied me gravely. I was a skinny little thing, they tell me, with large, solemn eyes.

"Well, boy," Pa said at last, "if you got to depend on your looks for what you get out'n this world, you just as well lay down right now." His hand was rough from the plow, but gentle as it touched my cheek. "Lucky for you, you got a *mind*. And that's something ain't everybody got. You go to school, boy, get yourself some learning. Make something out'n yourself. Ain't nothing you can't do if you got learning."[14]

Charley was determined that I would break the chain of poverty, that I would "be somebody."[15] As we worked our small vegetable garden in the sun or pulled a bucket of brackish water from the well, Charley would tell me, "You ain gon[16] be no poor farmer, Buddy. You gon be a teacher or maybe a doctor or a lawyer. One thing, bad as you is, you ain gon be no preacher."

I loved school with a desperate passion, which became more intense when I began to realize what a monumental struggle it was for my brothers and sisters to keep me there. The cramped, dingy classroom became a battleground where I was victorious. I stayed on top of my class. With glee I out-read, out-figured, and out-spelled the country boys who mocked my poverty, calling me "the boy with eyes in back of his head"—the "eyes" being the perpetual holes in my hand-me-down pants.

As the years passed, the economic strain was eased enough to make it possible for me to go on to high school. There were fewer mouths to feed for one thing: Alberta went North to find work at 16; Jamie died at 12.

I finished high school at the head of my class. For Mama and Pa and each of my brothers and sisters, my success was a personal triumph. One by one they came to me the week before commencement bringing crumpled bills and coins long hoarded, muttering, "Here, Buddy, put this on gradiation[17] clothes." My graduation suit was the first suit that was all my own.

On graduation night our cabin (less crowded now) was a frantic collage[18] of frayed nerves. I thought Charley would drive me mad.

"Buddy, you ain pressed[19] out them pants right.... Can't you git a better shine on them shoes?...Lord, you done messed up[20] that tie!"

Overwhelmed by the combination of Charley's nerves and my own, I finally exploded. "Man, cut it out!"[21] Abruptly he stopped tugging at my tie, and I was afraid I had hurt his feelings. "It's okay, Charley. Look, you're strangling me. The tie's okay."

Charley relaxed a little and gave a rather sheepish chuckle. "Sure, Buddy." He gave my shoulder a rough joggle. "But you gotta look good. You somebody."

My valedictory address was the usual idealistic, sentimental nonsense. I have forgotten what I said that night, but the sight of Mama and Pa and the rest is like a lithograph burned on my memory; Lil, her round face made beautiful by her proud smile; Pa, his head held high, eyes loving and fierce; Mama radiant. Years later when her shriveled hands were finally still, my mind kept coming back to her as she was now. I believe this moment the apex[22] of her entire life. All of them, even Alberta down from Baltimore—different now, but united with them in her pride. And Charley on the end of the row, still somehow the protector of them all. Charley, looking as if he were in the presence of something sacred.

As I made my way through the carefully rehearsed speech it was as if part of me were standing outside watching the whole thing—their proud, work-weary faces, myself wearing the suit that was their combined strength and love and hope: Lil with her lovely, low-pitched voice, Charley with the hands of an artist, Pa and Mama with God-knows-what potential lost with their sweat in the fields. I realized in that moment that I wasn't necessarily the smartest—only the youngest.

And the luckiest. The war came along, and I exchanged three years of my life (including a fair amount of my blood and a great deal of pain) for the GI[23] Bill [a government-funded plan for veterans' education] and a college education. Strange how time can slip by like water flowing through young fingers. One by one the changes came—the old house empty at last, the rest of us scattered; for me, marriage, graduate school, kids, a professorship, and by now a thickening waistline and thinning hair. My mind spins off the years, and I am back to this afternoon and today's Charley—still long and lean, still gentle-eyed, still my greatest fan and still determined to keep me on the ball.[24]

I didn't tell Charley I would be at a professional meeting in New York and would surely visit; he and Bea would have spent days in fixing up, and I would have had to be company. No, I would drop in on them, take them by surprise before they had a chance to stiffen up. I was anxious to see them—it had been so long. Yesterday and this morning were taken up with meetings in the posh Fifth Avenue hotel—a place we could not have dreamed in our boyhood. Late this afternoon I shook loose and headed for Harlem, hoping that Charley still came home for a few hours before his evening run. Leaving the glare and glitter of downtown, I entered the subway which lurks like the dark, inscrutable id[25] beneath the surface of the city. When I emerged, I was in Harlem.

Whenever I come to Harlem I feel somehow as if I were coming home—to some mythic ancestral home. The problems are real, the people are real—yet there is some mysterious epic quality about Harlem, as if all Black people began and ended there, as if each had left something of himself. As if in Harlem the very heart of Blackness pulsed its beautiful tortured rhythms. Joining the throngs of people that saunter[26] Lenox Avenue late afternoons, I headed for Charley's apartment. Along the way I savored the panorama of Harlem—women with shopping bags trudging wearily home; little kids flitting saucily through the crowd; groups of adolescent boys striding boldly along—some boisterous,[27] some ominously silent; tables of merchandise spread on the sidewalks, with hawkers singing their siren songs of irresistible bargains; a blaring microphone sending forth waves of words to draw passersby into a restless bunch around a slender young man whose eyes have seen Truth; defeated men standing around on street corners or sitting on steps, heads down, hands idle; posters announcing Garvey Day;[28] "Buy Black" stamped on pavements; store windows bright with things African; stores still boarded up, a livid scar from last year's rioting. There was a terrible tension in the air; I thought of how quickly dry timber becomes a roaring fire from a single spark.

I mounted the steps of Charley's building—old and in need of paint, like all the rest—and pushed the button to his apartment. Charley's buzzer rang. I pushed open the door and mounted the urine-scented stairs.

"Well, do Jesus—it's Buddy!" roared Charley as I arrived on the third floor. "Bea! Bea! Come here, girl, it's Buddy!" And somehow I was simultaneously shaking Charley's hand, getting clapped on the back, and being buried in the fervor of Bea's gigantic hug. They swept me from the hall into their dim apartment.

"Lord, Buddy, what you doing here? Whyn't[29] you tell me you was coming to New York?" His face was so lit up with pleasure that in spite of the inroads of time, he still looked like the Charley of years gone by, excited over a new litter of kittens.

"The place look a mess! Whyn't you let us know?" put in Bea, suddenly distressed.

"Looks fine to me, girl. And so do you!"

And she did. Bea is a fine-looking woman, plump and firm still, rich brown skin and thick black hair.

"Mary, Lucy, look, Uncle Buddy's here!" Two neat little girls came shyly from the TV. Uncle Buddy was something of a celebrity in this house.

I hugged them heartily, much to their discomfort. "Charley, wheregetting all these pretty women?"

We all sat in the warm kitchen, where Bea was preparing dinner. It felt good there. Beautiful odors mingled in the air. Charley sprawled in a chair near mine, his long arms and legs akimbo. No longer shy, the tinier girl sat on my lap, while her sister darted here and there like a merry little water bug. Bea bustled about, managing to keep up with both the conversation and the cooking.

I told them about the conference I was attending and, knowing it would give them pleasure, I mentioned that I had addressed the group that morning. Charley's eyes glistened.

"You hear that, Bea?" he whispered. "Buddy done spoke[30] in front of all them professors!"

"Sure I hear," Bea answered briskly, stirring something that was making an aromatic[31] steam. "I bet he weren't even scared. I bet them professors learnt something, too."

We all chuckled. "Well, anyway," I said, "I hope they did."

We talked about a hundred different things after that—Bea's job in the school cafeteria, my Jess and the kids, our scattered family.

"Seem like we don't git together no more, not since Mama and Pa passed on," said Charley sadly. "I ain't even got a Christmas card from Alberta for three-four year now."

"Well, ain't no two a y'all in the same city.[32] An' everybody scratchin to make ends meet,"[33] Bea replied. "Ain't nobody got time to get together."

"Yeah, that's the way it goes, I guess," I said.

"But it sure is good to see you, Buddy. Say, look, Lil told me about the cash you sent the children last winter when Jake was out of work all that time. She sure 'preciated[34] it."

"Lord, man, as close as you and Lil stuck to me when I was a kid, I owed her that and more. Say, Bea, did I ever tell you about the time—" as we swung into the usual reminiscences.

They insisted that I stay for dinner. Persuading me was no hard job: fried golden, ham hocks and collard greens, corn bread—if I'd tried to leave, my feet wouldn't have taken me. It was good to sit there in Charley's kitchen, my coat and tie flung over a chair, surrounded by food and love.

"Say, Buddy, a couple months back I picked up a kid from your school."

"No stuff."

"I axed* him did he know you. He say he was in your class last year."

"Did you get his name?"

"No, I didn't ax him that. Man, he told me you were the best teacher he had. He said you were one smart cat!"

"He told you that cause you're my brother."

"Your brother—I didn't tell him I was your brother. I said you was a old friend of mine."

I put my fork down and leaned over. "What you tell him that for?"

Charley explained patiently as he had explained things when I was a child and had missed an obvious truth. "I didn't want your students to know your brother wasn't nothing but a cab driver. You somebody."

"You're a nut," I said gently. "You should've told that kid the truth." I wanted to say, I'm proud of you, you've got more on the ball than most people I know, I wouldn't have been anything at all except for you. But he would have been embarrassed.

Bea brought in the dessert—homemade sweet potato pie! "Buddy, I must of knew you were coming! I just had a mind I wanted to make some sweet potato pie."

There's nothing in this world I like better than Bea's sweet potato pie!

"Lord, girl, how you expect me to eat all that?"

The slice she put before me was outrageously big—and moist and covered with a light golden crust—I ate it all.

"Bea, I'm gonna have to eat and run," I said at last.

Charley guffawed.* "Much as you et,* I don't see how you gonna walk, let alone run." He went out to get his cab from the garage several blocks away.

Bea was washing the tiny girl's face. "Wait a minute, Buddy, I'm gon give you the rest of that pie to take with you."

"Great!" I'd eaten all I could hold, but my spirit was still hungry for sweet potato pie.

Bea got out some waxed paper and wrapped up the rest of the pie.

"That'll do you for a snack tonight." She slipped it into a brown paper bag.

I gave her a long good-by hug. "Bea, I love you for a lot of things. Your cooking is one of them!" We had a last comfortable laugh together. I kissed the little girls and went outside to wait for Charley, holding the bag of pie reverently.

In a minute Charley's ancient cab limped to the curb. I plopped into the seat next to him, and we headed downtown. Soon we were assailed by the garish lights of New York on a sultry spring night. We chatted as Charley skillfully managed the heavy traffic. I looked at his long hands on the wheel and wondered what they could have done with artists' brushes.

We stopped a bit down the street from my hotel. I invited him in, but he said he had to get on with his evening run. But as I opened the door to get out, he commanded in the old familiar voice, "Buddy, you wait!" For a moment I thought my fly was open* or something. "What's wrong?"

"What's that you got there?"

I was bewildered. "That? You mean this bag? That's a piece of sweet potato pie Bea fixed for me."

"You ain't going through the lobby of no big hotel carrying no brown paper bag."

"Man, you crazy! Of course I'm going—Look, Bea fixed it for me—That's my pie.—"

Charley's eyes were miserable. "Folks in that hotel don't go through the lobby carrying no brown paper bags. That's country.* And you can't—neither. You somebody, Buddy. You got to be right. Now, gimme* that bag."

"I want that pie, Charley. I've got nothing to prove to anybody—"

I couldn't believe it. But there was no point in arguing. Foolish as it seemed to me, it was important to him.

"You got to look right, Buddy. Can't nobody look dignified carrying brown paper bag."

So finally, thinking how tasty it would have been and how seldom I got chance to eat anything that good, I handed over my bag of sweet potato pie. If it was that important to him—

I tried not to show my irritation. "Okay, man—take care now." I slammed the door harder than I had intended, walked rapidly to the hotel and entered the brilliant crowded lobby.

"That Charley!" I thought. Walking slower now, I crossed the carpeted lobby toward the elevator, still thinking of my lost snack. I had to admit that of all the herd of people who jostled each other in the lobby, not one was carrying a brown paper bag. Or anything but expensive attaché cases or slick packages from exclusive shops. I suppose we all operate according to the symbols that are meaningful to us, and to Charley a brown paper bag symbolizes the humble life he thought I had left. I was somebody.

I don't know what made me glance back, but I did. And suddenly the tears and laughter, toil and love of a lifetime burst around me like fireworks in a night sky.

For there, following a few steps behind, came Charley, proudly carrying a brown paper bag full of sweet potato pie.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *flat*: an apartment
2. *shanty*: a shack, a poor wooden building used as a home or for storage
3. *sharecroppers*: tenant farmers who received shelter, food, and credit for purchasing seeds in return for working as farmers. After the harvest, they shared the profits with the owner of the land.
4. *trudged*: to walk or move slowly and with effort
5. *c'llection* = collection
6. *(to) don our threadbare Sunday-go-to-the meeting clothes*: to put on the worn-out clothes that have been saved especially for going to church on Sundays
7. *gaunt*: lean; thin
8. *(to) ride herd on*: to discipline
9. *git yourself in here*: get in here
10. *pallet*: sleeping platform
11. *ubiquitous*: ever-present; found everywhere
12. *out'n* = out of
13. *that's something ain't everybody got* = that's something that everybody doesn't have
14. *Ain't nothing you can't do if you got learning* = There isn't anything you can't do if you have education
15. *(to) be somebody*: to be an important person
16. *ain't gon* = aren't going to
17. *gradiation* = graduation (pronunciation variant of Black English)
18. *collage*: an artistic mixture
19. *ain't pressed* = haven't pressed
20. *done messed* = have messed
21. *cut it out!*: Stop it!
22. *apex*: top
23. *GI*: a term referring to a member of the U.S. Armed Forces
24. *on the ball*: aware; perceptive
25. *inscrutable id*: that little-understood part of the human psyche responsible for one's impulsive behavior
26. *saunter*: walk slowly; plod
27. *boisterous*: loud; turbulent; wild
28. *Garvey Day*: a day commemorating African American leader Marcus Garvey (1887-1940)
29. *whyn't* = why didn't
30. *done spoke* = spoke
31. *aromatic*: fragrant, scented
32. *ain't no two y'all* = there aren't two of you
33. *make ends meet*: to have enough money to meet all expenses
34. *preciated* = appreciated
35. *ax/axed* = ask/asked
36. *guffawed*: laughed loudly
37. *et* = ate
38. *my fly was open*: the zipper of my pants was open
39. *that's country*: that is behavior appropriate for the rural areas (it is not sophisticated behavior)
40. *gimme* = give me

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Why do you think the author chose to use the flashback technique of beginning the story in the present and then moving to the past?*
2. *What are the narrator's feelings about Charley? Explain.*
3. *Are Charley and his wife envious of Buddy's success? Explain.*
4. *Discuss the meaning of each of the following statements taken from the story:*
   - A. If you got to depend on your looks for what you get out'n this world, you just as well lay down right now." (page 78)
   - B. I thought of how quickly dry timber becomes a roaring fire from a single spark. (page 80)
   - C. …but my spirit was still hungry for sweet potato pie. (page 81)
   - D. …I've got nothing to prove to anybody— (page 81)
   - E. I suppose we all operate according to the symbols that are meaningful to us.… (page 81)
5. *Why didn't Charley want Buddy to carry the bag of sweet potato pie into his hotel?*

The Writer in the Family

E. L. DOCTOROW

Families do not always come together. A wife may be rejected by her husband's family, and these feelings may persist even though the husband and wife have a loving marriage. In this story, son Jonathan is drawn into this family quarrel following the death of his father. In challenging the demands of his aunts, he realizes how much his mother and father loved each other and how much love his father had for him.

In 1955 my father died with his ancient mother still alive in a nursing home. The old lady was ninety and hadn't even known he was ill. Thinking the shock might kill her, my aunts told her that he had moved to Arizona for his bronchitis.[1] To the immigrant generation of my grandmother, Arizona was the American equivalent of the Alps, it was where you went for your health. More accurately, it was where you went if you had the money. Since my father had failed in all the business enterprises of his life, this was the aspect of the news my grandmother dwelled on, that he had finally had some success. And so it came about that as we mourned him at home in our stocking feet, my grandmother was bragging to her cronies[2] about her son's new life in the dry air of the desert.

My aunts had decided on their course of action without consulting us. It meant neither my mother nor my brother nor I could visit Grandma because we were supposed to have moved west too, a family, after all. My brother Harold and I didn't mind—it was always a nightmare at the old people's home, where they all sat around staring at us while we tried to make conversation with Grandma. She looked terrible, had numbers of ailments, and her mind wandered. Not seeing her was no disappointment either for my mother, who had never gotten along with the old woman and did not visit when she could have. But what was disturbing was that my aunts had acted in the manner of that side of the family of making government on everyone's behalf, the true citizens by blood and the lesser citizens by marriage. It was exactly this attitude that had tormented my mother all her married life. She claimed Dave's family had never accepted her. She had battled them for twenty-five years as an outsider.

A few weeks after the end of our ritual mourning my aunt Dora phoned us from her home in Larchmont. Aunt Dora was the wealthier of my father's sisters. Her husband was a lawyer, and both her sons were at Amherst. She had called to say that Grandma was asking why she didn't hear from Dave. I had answered the phone. "You're the writer in the family," my aunt said. "Your father had so much faith in you. Would you mind making up something? Send it to me and I'll read it to her. She won't know the difference."

That evening, at the kitchen table, I pushed my homework aside and composed a letter. I tried to imagine my father's response to his new life. He had never been west. He had never traveled anywhere. In his generation the great journey was from the working class to the professional class, and he hadn't managed that, either. But he loved New York, where he had been born and lived his life, and he was always discovering new things about it. He especially loved the old parts of the city below Canal Street, where he would find ships' chandlers or firms that wholesaled in spices and teas. He was a salesman for an appliance jobber[3] with accounts all over the city. He liked to bring home rare cheeses or exotic foreign vegetables that were sold only in certain neighborhoods. Once he brought home a barometer, another time an antique ship's telescope in a wooded case with a brass snap.

"Dear Mama," I wrote. "Arizona is beautiful. The sun shines all day and the air is warm and I feel better than I have in years. The desert is not as barren as you would expect, but filled with wildflowers and cactus plants and peculiar crooked trees that look like men holding their arms out. You can see great distances in whatever direction you turn and to the west is a range of mountains maybe fifty miles from here, but in the morning with the sun on them you can see the snow on their crests."

My aunt called some days later and told me it was when she read this letter aloud to the old lady that the full effect of Dave's death came over her. She had to excuse herself and went out in the parking lot to cry. "I wept so," she said. "I felt such terrible longing for him. You're so right, he loved to go places, he loved life, he loved everything."

We began trying to organize our lives. My father had borrowed money against his insurance and there was very little left. Some commissions[4] were still due from his firm but it didn't look as they would honor them. There were a couple of thousand dollars in a savings bank that had to be maintained there until the estate was settled. The lawyer involved was Aunt Dora's husband and he was very proper. "The estate!" my mother muttered, gesturing as if to pull out her hair. "The estate!" She applied for a job part-time in the admissions office of the hospital where my father's terminal illness had been diagnosed, and where he had spent some months until they had sent him home to die. She knew a lot of the doctors and staff and she had learned "from bitter experience," as she told them, about the hospital routine. She was hired.

I hated that hospital, it was dark and grim and full of tortured people. I thought it was masochistic[5] of my mother to seek out a job there, but did not tell her so.

We lived in an apartment on the corner of 175th Street and the Grand Concourse, one flight up. Three rooms. I shared the bedroom with my brother. It was jammed with furniture because when my father had required a hospital bed in the last weeks of his illness we had moved some of the living-room pieces into the bedroom and made over the living room for him. We had to navigate bookcases, beds, a gateleg table,[6] bureaus, a record player and radio console, stacks of 78 albums,[7] my brother's trombone and music stand, and so on. My mother continued to sleep on the convertible sofa in the living room that had been their bed before his illness. The two rooms were connected by a narrow hall made even narrower by bookcases along the wall. Off the hall was a small kitchen and dinette and a bathroom. There were lots of appliances in the kitchen—broiler, toaster, pressure cooker, counter-top dishwasher, blender—that my father had gotten through his job at cost.[8] A treasured phrase in our house. "at cost." But most of these fixtures went unused because my mother did not care for them. Chromium devices with timers or gauges that required the reading of elaborate instructions were not for her. They were in part responsible for the awful clutter of our lives and now she wanted to get rid of them. "We're being buried," she said. "Who needs them!"

So we agreed to throw out or sell anything inessential. While I found boxes for the appliances and my brother tied the boxes with twine, my mother opened my father's closet and took out his clothes. He had several suits because as a salesman he needed to look his best. My mother wanted us to try on his suits to see which of them could be altered and used. My brother refused to try them on. I tried on one jacket, which was too large for me. The lining inside the sleeves chilled my arms and the vaguest scent of my father's being came to me.

"This is way too big," I said.

"Don't worry," my mother said. "I had it cleaned. Would I let you wear it if I hadn't?"

It was the evening, the end of winter, and snow was coming down on the windowsill and melting as it settled.

The ceiling bulb glared on a pile of my father's suits and trousers on hangers flung across the bed in the shape of a dead man. We refused to try on anything more, and my mother began to cry.

"What are you crying for?" my brother shouted. "You wanted to get rid of things, didn't you?"

A few weeks later my aunt phoned again and said she thought it would be necessary to have another letter from Dave. Grandma had fallen out of her chair and bruised herself and was very depressed.

"How long does this go on?" my mother said.

"It's not so terrible," my aunt said, "for the little time left to make things easier for her."

My mother slammed down the phone. "He can't even die when he wants to!" she cried. "Even death comes second to Mama! What are they afraid of, the shock will kill her? Nothing can kill her. She's indestructible! A stake through the heart couldn't kill her!"[9]

When I sat down in the kitchen to write the letter I found it more difficult than the first one. "Don't watch me," I said to my brother. "It's hard enough."

"You don't have to do something just because someone wants you to," Harold said. He was two years older than me and had started at City College; but when my father became ill he had switched to night school and gotten a job in a record store.

"Dear Mama," I wrote. "I hope you're feeling well. We're all fit as a fiddle. The life here is good and the people are very friendly and informal. Nobody wears suits and ties here. Just a pair of slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. Perhaps a sweater in the evening. I have bought into a very successful radio and record business and I'm doing very well. You remember DAVE'S ELECTRIC, my old place on Forty-third Street? Well, now it's DAVE'S ARIZONA ELECTRIC and we have a line of television sets as well."

I sent that letter off to my Aunt Dora, and as we all knew she would, she phoned soon after. My brother held his hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Dora with her latest review," he said.

"Jonathan? You're a very talented young man. I just wanted to tell you what a blessing your letter was. Her whole face lit up when I read the part about Dave's store. That would be an excellent way to continue."

"Well, I hope I don't have to do this anymore, Aunt Dora. It's not very honest."

Her tone changed. "Is your mother there? Let me talk to her."

"She's not here," I said.

"Tell her not to worry," my aunt said. "A poor old lady who has never wished anything but the best for her will soon die."

I did not repeat this to my mother, for whom it would have been one more in the family anthology of unforgivable remarks. But then I had to suffer it myself for the possible truth it might embody. Each side defended its position with rhetoric, but I, who wanted peace, rationalized the snubs and rebuffs each inflicted on the other, taking no stands, like my father himself.

Years ago his life had fallen into a pattern of business failures and missed opportunities. The great debate between his family on the one side, and my mother Ruth on the other, had to do with whose fault this was—who was responsible for the fact that he had not lived up to anyone's expectations?

As to the two prophecies, when spring came my mother's prevailed: Grandma was still alive.

One balmy Sunday my mother and brother and I took the bus to the Beth El cemetery[10] in New Jersey to visit my father's grave. It was situated on a slight rise. We stood looking over rolling fields embedded with monuments. Here and there processions of black cars wound their way through the lanes, or clusters of people stood at open graves. My father's grave was planted with tiny shoots of evergreen but it lacked a headstone. We had chosen one and paid for it and then the stonecutters had gone on strike. Without a headstone my father did not seem to be honorably dead. He didn't seem to me properly buried.

My mother gazed at the plot beside his reserved for her coffin. "They were always too fine for other people," she said. "Even in the old days on Stanton Street. They put on airs. Nobody was ever good enough for them. Finally Dave himself was not good enough for them. Except to get them things wholesale. Then he was good enough for them."

"Mom, please," my brother said.

"If I had known. Before I ever met him he was tied to his mama's apron strings.[11] And Minnie's apron strings were like chains, let me tell you. We had to live where we could be near them for the Sunday visits. Every Sunday, that was my life, a visit to Mamaleh.[12] Whatever she knew I wanted, a better apartment, a stick of furniture, a summer camp for the boys, she spoke against it. You know your father, every decision had to be considered and reconsidered. And nothing changed. Nothing ever changed."

She began to cry. We sat her down on a nearby bench. My brother walked off to read the names on stones. I looked at my mother, who was crying, and I went off after my brother.

"Mom's still crying," I said. "Shouldn't we do something?"

"It's all right," he said. "It's what she came here for."

"Yes," I said, and then a sob escaped from my throat. "But I feel like crying too."

My brother Harold put his arm around me. "Look at this old black stone here," he said. "The way it's carved. You can see the changing fashion in monuments—just like everything else."

Somewhere in this time I began dreaming of my father. Not the robust father of my childhood, the handsome man with healthy pink skin and brown eyes and a mustache and the thinning hair parted in the middle. My dead father. We were taking him home from the hospital. It was understood that he had come back from death. This was amazing and joyous. On the other hand, he was terribly mysteriously damaged, or, more accurately, spoiled and unclean. He was very yellowed and debilitated[13] by his death, and there were no guarantees that he wouldn't soon die again. He seemed aware of this and his entire personality was changed. He was angry and impatient with all of us. We were trying to help him in some way, struggling to get him home, but something prevented us, something we had to fix, a tattered suitcase that had sprung open, some mechanical thing: he had a car but it wouldn't start; or the car was made of wood; or his clothes, which had become too large for him, had caught in the door. In one version he was all bandaged and as we tried to lift him from his wheelchair into a taxi the bandage began to unroll and catch in the spokes of the wheelchair. This seemed to be some unreasonableness on his part. My mother looked on sadly and tried to get him to cooperate.

That was the dream. I shared it with no one. Once when I woke, crying out, my brother turned on the light. He wanted to know what I'd been dreaming but I pretended I didn't remember. The dream made me feel guilty. I felt guilty in the dream too because my enraged father knew we didn't want to live with him. The dream represented us taking him home, or trying to, but it was nevertheless understood by all of us that he was to live alone. He was this derelict[14] back from death, but what we were doing was taking him to some place where he would live by himself without help from anyone until he died again.

At one point I became so fearful of this dream that I tried not to go to sleep. I tried to think of good things about my father and to remember him before his illness. He used to call me matey.[15] "Hello, matey," he would say when he came home from work. He always wanted us to go someplace—to the store, to the park, to a ball game. He loved to walk. When I went walking with him he would say: "Hold your shoulders back, don't slump. Hold your head up and look at the world. Walk as if you meant it!" As he strode down the street his shoulders moved from side to side, as if he was hearing some kind of cakewalk. He moved with a bounce. He was always eager to see what was around the corner.

The next request for a letter coincided with a special occasion in the house: My brother Harold had met a girl he liked and had gone out with her several times. Now she was coming to our house for dinner.

We had prepared for this for days, cleaning everything in sight, giving the house a going-over, washing the dust of disuse from the glasses and good dishes. My mother came home early from work to get the dinner going. We opened the gateleg table in the living room and brought in the kitchen chairs. My mother spread the table with a laundered white cloth and put out her silver.[16] It was the first family occasion since my father's illness.

I liked my brother's girlfriend a lot. She was a thin girl with very straight hair and she had a terrific smile. Her presence seemed to excite the air. It was amazing to have a living breathing girl in our house. She looked around and what she said was: "Oh, I've never seen so many books!" While she and my brother sat at the table my mother was in the kitchen putting the food into serving bowls and I was going from the kitchen to the living room, kidding around like a waiter, with a white cloth over my arm and a high style of service, placing the serving dish of green beans on the table with a flourish. In the kitchen my mother's eyes were sparkling. She looked at me and nodded and mimed the words: "She's adorable!"

My brother suffered himself[17] to be waited on. He was wary of what we might say. He kept glancing at the girl—her name was Susan—to see if we met with her approval. She worked in an insurance office and was taking courses in accounting at City College. Harold was under a terrible strain but he was excited and happy too. He had bought a bottle of Concord grape wine to go with the roast chicken. He held up his glass and proposed a toast. My mother said: "To good health and happiness," and we all drank, even I. At that moment the phone rang and I went into the bedroom to get it.

"Jonathan? This is your Aunt Dora. How is everyone?"

"Fine, thank you."

"I want to ask one last favor of you. I need a letter from Dave. Your grandma's very ill. Do you think you can?"

"Who is it?" my mother called from the living room.

"Okay, Aunt Dora," I said quickly. "I have to go now, we're eating dinner." And I hung up the phone.

"It was my friend Louie," I said, sitting back down. "He didn't know the math pages to review."

The dinner was very fine. Harold and Susan washed the dishes and by the time they were done my mother and I had folded up the gateleg table and put it back against the wall and I had swept the crumbs up with the carpet sweeper. We all sat and talked and listened to records for a while and then my brother took Susan home. The evening had gone very well.

Once when my mother wasn't home my brother had pointed out something: the letters from Dave weren't really necessary. "What is this ritual?" he said, holding his palms up. "Grandma is almost totally blind, she's half deaf and crippled. Does the situation really call for a literary composition? Does it need verisimilitude?[18] Would the old lady know the difference if she was read the phone book?"

"Then why did Aunt Dora ask me?"

"That is the question, Jonathan. Why did she? After all, she could write the letter herself—what difference would it make? And if not Dora, why not Dora's sons, the Amherst students? They should have learned by now to write."

"But they're not Dave's sons," I said.

"That's exactly the point," my brother said. "The idea is service. Dad used to bust his balls[19] getting them things wholesale, getting them deals on things. Dora of Westchester[20] really needed things at cost. And Aunt Molly. And Aunt Molly's husband, and Aunt Molly's ex-husband. Grandma, if she needed an errand done. He was always on the hook for something. They never thought his time was important. They never thought every favor he got was one he had to pay back. Appliances, records, watches, china, opera tickets, any goddamn thing. Call Dave."

"It was a matter of pride to him to be able to do things for them," I said. "To have connections."

"Yeah, I wonder why," my brother said. He looked out the window.

Then suddenly it dawned on me that I was being implicated.[21]

"You should use your head more," my brother said.

Yet I had agreed once again to write a letter from the desert and so I did. I mailed it off to Aunt Dora. A few days later, when I came home from school, I thought I saw her sitting in her car in front of our house. She drove a black Buick Roadmaster, a very large clean car with whitewall tires. It was Aunt Dora all right. She blew the horn when she saw me. I went over and leaned in at the window.

"Hello, Jonathan," she said. "I haven't long. Can you get in the car?"

"Mom's not home," I said. "She's working."

"I know that. I came to talk to you."

"Would you like to come upstairs?"

"I can't, I have to get back to Larchmont. Can you get in for a moment, please?"

I got in the car. My Aunt Dora was a very pretty white-haired woman, very elegant, and she wore tasteful clothes. I had always liked her and from the time I was a child she had enjoyed pointing out to everyone that I looked more like her son than Dave's. She wore white gloves and held the steering wheel and looked straight ahead as she talked, as if the car was in traffic and not sitting at the curb.

"Jonathan," she said, "there is your letter on the seat. Needless to say I didn't read it to Grandma. I'm giving it back to you and I won't ever say a word to anyone. This is just between us. I never expected cruelty from you. I never thought you were capable of doing something so deliberately cruel and perverse."

I said nothing.

"Your mother has very bitter feelings and now I see she has poisoned you with them. She has always resented the family. She is a very strong-willed, selfish person."

"No she isn't," I said.

"I wouldn't expect you to agree. She drove poor Dave crazy with her demands. She always had the highest aspirations and he could never fulfill them to her satisfaction. When he still had his store he kept your mother's brother, who drank, on salary. After the war when he began to make a little money he had to buy Ruth a mink jacket because she was so desperate to have one. He had debts to pay but she wanted a mink. He was a very special person my brother, he should have accomplished something special, but he loved your mother and devoted his life to her. And all she ever thought about was keeping up with the Joneses."

I watched the traffic going up the Grand Concourse. A bunch of kids were waiting at the bus stop at the corner. They had put their books on the ground and were horsing around.

"I'm sorry I have to descend to this," Aunt Dora said. "I don't like talking about people this way. If I have nothing good to say about someone, I'd rather not say anything. How is Harold?"

"Fine."

"Did he help you write this marvelous letter?"

"No."

After a moment she said more softly: "How are you all getting along?"

"Fine."

"I would invite you up for Passover if I thought your mother would accept."

I didn't answer.

She turned on the engine. "I'll say good-bye now, Jonathan. Take your letter. I hope you give some time to thinking about what you've done."

That evening when my mother came home from work I saw that she wasn't as pretty as my Aunt Dora. I usually thought my mother was a good-looking woman, but I saw now that she was too heavy and that her hair was undistinguished.

"Why are you looking at me?" she said.

"I'm not."

"I learned something interesting today," my mother said. "We may be eligible for a V.A. pension because of the time your father spent in the Navy."

That took me by surprise. Nobody had ever told me my father was in the Navy.

"In World War I," she said, "he went to Webb's Naval Academy on the Harlem River. He was training to be an ensign. But the war ended and he never got his commission."

After dinner the three of us went through the closets looking for my father's papers, hoping to find some proof that could be filed with the Veterans Administration. We came up with two things, a Victory medal, which my brother said everyone got for being in the service during the Great War, and an astounding sepia photograph of my father and his shipmates on the deck of a ship. They were dressed in bell-bottoms and T-shirts and armed with mops and pails, brooms and brushes.

"I never knew this," I found myself saying. "I never knew this."

"You just don't remember," my brother said.

I was able to pick out my father. He stood at the end of the row, a thin, handsome boy with a full head of hair, a mustache, and an intelligent smiling countenance.

"He had a joke," my mother said. "They called their training ship the S.S. Constipation because it never moved."

Neither the picture nor the medal was proof of anything, but my brother thought a duplicate of my father's service record had to be in Washington somewhere and that it was just a matter of learning how to go about finding it.

"The pension wouldn't amount to much," my mother said. "Twenty or thirty dollars. But it would certainly help."

I took the picture of my father and his shipmates and propped it against the lamp at my bedside. I looked into his youthful face and tried to relate it to the Father I knew. I looked at the picture a long time. Only gradually did my eye connect it to the set of Great Sea Novels in the bottom shelf of the bookcase a few feet away. My father had given that set to me: it was uniformly bound in green with gilt lettering and it included works by Melville, Conrad, Victor Hugo and Captain Marryat. And flying across the top of the books, jammed in under the sagging shelf above, was his old ship's telescope in its wooden case with the brass snap.

I thought how stupid, and imperceptive, and self-centered I had been never to have understood while he was alive what my father's dream for his life had been.

On the other hand, I had written in my last letter from Arizona—the one that had so angered Aunt Dora—something that might allow me, the writer in the family, to soften my judgment of myself. I will conclude by giving the letter here in its entirety.

Dear Mama,

This will be my final letter to you since I have been told by the doctors that I am dying.

I have sold my store at a very fine profit and am sending Dora a check for five thousand dollars to be deposited in your account. My present to you, Mamaleh. Let Dora show you the passbook.

As for the nature of my ailment, the doctors haven't told me what it is, but I know that I am simply dying of the wrong life. I should never have come to the desert. It wasn't the place for me.

I have asked Ruth and the boys to have my body cremated and the ashes scattered in the ocean.

Your loving son,

Dave

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *bronchitis*: inflammation of the bronchial tubes leading to the lungs, making it difficult to breathe
2. *cronies*: close friends
3. *appliance jobber*: a middle man who acquires appliances (stoves, refrigerators, etc., from the manufacturer and sells them to customers
4. *commissions*: bonuses made on sales
5. *masochistic*: inflicting pain on oneself
6. *gateleg table*: a folding table
7. *78 albums*: collections of phonograph records that made 78 revolutions per minute on the turntable
8. *at cost*: no markup in price beyond the actual cost of manufacture
9. *"A stake through the heart couldn't kill her!"*: this is the method supposedly used to kill vampires
10. *Beth El cemetery*: a place of burial in New York City for members of the Jewish faith
11. *tied to his mama's apron strings*: totally dependent upon one's mother for direction
12. *Mamaleh*: a Yiddish form of address for Mother
13. *debilitated*: weakened
14. *derelict*: a homeless, social misfit, a bum
15. *matey*: originally applied to sailors who work together on a ship, the term can refer to a co-worker or friend
16. *silver*: sterling silver dining utensils (knives, forks, and spoons) used for special occasions
17. *suffered himself*: allowed himself
18. *verisimilitude*: something that appears real or genuine
19. *bust his balls*: (impolite, slang) make a great effort
20. *Westchester*: one of the wealthiest counties in the United States
21. *implicated*: involved; associated; connected
22. *keeping up with the Joneses*: staying on the same material level as one's neighbors or peers; trying to acquiring the same material possessions as one's friends or relatives
23. *horsing around*: acting playfully
24. *"Did he help you write this marvelous letter?"*: Aunt Dora is saying this sarcastically
25. S.S. *Constipation*: A play on the name of the famous battleship the S.S. *Constitution*. Constipation occurs when one cannot move one's bowels.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What do you know about Jonathan's family?*
2. *Why is Jonathan originally willing to do what his Aunt Dora asks?*
3. *Why does Jonathan's brother Harold dislike his aunts so much?*
4. *Why does Aunt Dora resent Jonathan's mother?*
5. *How does Jonathan come to a better understanding of who his father was?*
6. *Why was Jonathan's last letter so upsetting to Aunt Dora?*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Charles

SHIRLEY JACKSON

A mother talks about Charles, a little boy in her son's kindergarten. From what her son, Laurie, tells her, Charles is a rude, naughty child, a real problem for the teacher and the other children. By comparison, Laurie appears well-behaved—at least according to the mother—who looks forward to meeting and sympathizing with Charles's mother.

The day my son Laurie started kindergarten

he renounced[1] corduroy overalls with bibs and began wearing blue jeans with a belt; I watched him go off the first morning with the older girl next door, seeing clearly that an era of my life was ended, my sweet-voiced nursery-school tot replaced by a long-trousered, swaggering[2] character who forgot to stop at the corner and wave good-bye to me.

He came home the same way, the front door slamming open, his cap on the floor, and the voice suddenly become raucous[3] shouting, "Isn't anybody here?"

At lunch he spoke insolently[4] to his father, spilled his baby sister's milk, and remarked that his teacher said we were not to take the name of the Lord in vain.[5]

"How was school today?" I asked, elaborately casual.

"All right," he said.

"Did you learn anything?" his father asked.

Laurie regarded his father coldly. "I didn't learn nothing," he said.

"Anything," I said. "Didn't learn anything."

"The teacher spanked a boy, though," Laurie said, addressing his bread and butter. "For being fresh,"[6] he added with his mouth full.

"What did he do?" I asked. "Who was it?"

"Laurie thought. "It was Charles," he said. "He was fresh. The teacher spanked[7] him and made him stand in a corner. He was awfully fresh."

"What did he do?" I asked again, but Laurie slid off his chair, took a cookie,[8] and left, while his father was still saying, "See here, young man."

The next day Laurie remarked at lunch, as soon as he sat down, "Well, Charles was bad again today." He grinned enormously and said, "Today Charles hit the teacher."

"Good heavens," I said, mindful of the Lord's name, "I suppose he got spanked again?"

"He sure did," Laurie said. "Look up," he said to his father.

"What?" his father said, looking up.

"Look down," Laurie said. "Look at my thumb. Gee, you're dumb."[9] He began to laugh insanely.

"Why did Charles hit the teacher?" I asked quickly.

"Because she tried to make him color with red crayons," Laurie said.

"Charles wanted to color with green crayons, so he hit the teacher and she spanked him and said nobody play with Charles but everybody did."

The third day—it was Wednesday of the first week—Charles bounced a seesaw[10] onto the head of a little girl and made her bleed, and the teacher made him stay inside all during recess. Thursday Charles had to stand in a corner during storytime because he kept pounding his feet on the floor. Friday Charles was deprived of blackboard privileges because he threw chalk.

On Saturday I remarked to my husband, "Do you think kindergarten is too unsettling for Laurie? All this toughness and bad grammar, and this Charles boy sounds like such a bad influence."

"It'll be all right," my husband said reassuringly. "Bound to be people like Charles in the world. Might as well meet them now as later."

On Monday Laurie came home late, full of news. "Charles," he shouted as he came up the hill; I was waiting anxiously on the front step. "Charles," Laurie yelled[11] all the way up the hill, "Charles was bad again."

"Come right in," I said, as soon as he came close enough. "Lunch is waiting."

"You know what Charles did?" he demanded, following me through the door. "Charles yelled so in school they sent a boy in from first grade to tell the teacher she had to make Charles keep quiet, and so Charles had to stay after school. And so all the children stayed to watch him."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He just sat there," Laurie said, climbing into his chair at the table. "Hi, Pop, y'old dust mop."

"Charles had to stay after school today," I told my husband. "Everyone stayed with him."

"What does this Charles look like?" my husband asked Laurie. "What's his other name?"

"He's bigger than me," Laurie said. "And he doesn't have any rubbers[12] and he doesn't ever wear a jacket."

Monday night was the first Parent-Teachers meeting, and only the fact that the baby had a cold kept me from going; I wanted passionately to meet Charles's mother. On Tuesday Laurie remarked suddenly, "Our teacher had a friend come see her in school today."

"Charles's mother?" my husband and I asked simultaneously.

"Naaah," Laurie said scornfully. "It was a man who came and made us do exercises; we had to touch our toes. Look." He climbed down from his chair and squatted down and touched his toes. "Like this," he said. He got solemnly back into his chair and said, picking up his fork, "Charles didn't even *do* exercises."

"That's fine," I said heartily. "Didn't Charles want to do exercises?"

"Naaah," Laurie said. "Charles was so fresh to the teacher's friend he wasn't *let* do exercises."

"Fresh again?" I said.

"He kicked the teacher's friend," Laurie said. "The teacher's friend told Charles to touch his toes like I just did, and Charles kicked him."

"What are they going to do about Charles, do you suppose?" Laurie's father asked him.

Laurie shrugged elaborately. "Throw him out of school, I guess," he said.

Wednesday and Thursday were routine; Charles yelled during story hour and hit a boy in the stomach and made him cry. On Friday Charles stayed after school again, and so did all the other children.

With the third week of kindergarten Charles was an institution[13] in our family; the baby was being a Charles when she cried all afternoon; Laurie did a Charles when he filled his wagon full of mud and pulled it through the kitchen; even my husband, when he caught his elbow in the telephone cord and pulled telephone, ash tray, and a bowl of flowers off the table, said, after the first minute, "Looks like Charles."

During the third and fourth weeks it looked like a reformation in Charles; Laurie reported grimly at lunch on Thursday of the third week, "Charles was so good today the teacher gave him an apple."

"What?" I said, and my husband added warily, "You mean Charles?"

"Charles," Laurie said. "He gave the crayons around and he picked up the books afterward and the teacher said he was her helper."

"What happened?" I asked incredulously.[14]

"He was her helper, that's all," Laurie said, and shrugged.

"Can this be true, about Charles?" I asked my husband that night. "Can something like this happen?"

"Wait and see," my husband said cynically.[15] "When you've got a Charles to deal with, this may mean he's only plotting."

He seemed to be wrong. For over a week Charles was the teacher's helper; each day he handed things out and he picked things up; no one had to stay after school.

"The P.T.A. meeting's[16] next week again," I told my husband one evening. "I'm going to find Charles's mother there."

"Ask her what happened to Charles," my husband said. "I'd like to know."

"I'd like to know myself," I said.

On Friday of that week things were back to normal. "You know what Charles did today?" Laurie demanded at the lunch table, in a voice slightly awed. "He told a little girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap and Charles laughed."

"What word?" his father asked unwisely, and Laurie said, "I'll have to whisper it to you, it's so bad." He got down off his chair and went around to his father. His father bent his head down and Laurie whispered joyfully. His father's eyes widened.

"Did Charles tell the little girl to say that?" he asked respectfully.

"She said it twice," Laurie said. "Charles told her to say it twice."

"What happened to Charles?" my husband asked.

"Nothing," Laurie said. "He was passing out the crayons."

Monday morning Charles abandoned the little girl and said the evil word himself three or four times, getting his mouth washed out with soap each time. He also threw chalk.

My husband came to the door with me that evening as I set out for the P.T.A. meeting. "Invite her over for a cup of tea after the meeting," he said. "I want to get a look at her."

"If only she's there," I said prayerfully.

"She'll be there," my husband said. "I don't see how they could hold a P.T.A. meeting without Charles's mother."

At the meeting I sat restlessly, scanning each comfortable matronly[17] face, trying to determine which one hid the secret of Charles. None of them looked to me haggard[18] enough. No one stood up in the meeting and apologized for the way her son had been acting. No one mentioned Charles.

After the meeting I identified and sought out Laurie's kindergarten teacher. She had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of chocolate cake; I had a plate with a cup of tea and a piece of marshmallow cake. We maneuvered[19] up to one another cautiously, and smiled.

"I've been so anxious to meet you," I said. "I'm Laurie's mother."

"We're all so interested in Laurie," she said.

"Well, he certainly likes kindergarten," I said. "he talks about it all the time."

"We had a little trouble adjusting, the first week or so," she said primly, "but now he's a fine little helper. With occasional lapses,[20] of course."

"Laurie usually adjusts very quickly," I said. "I suppose this time it's Charles's influence."

"Charles?"

"Yes," I said, laughing, "you must have your hands full[21] in that kindergarten with Charles."

"Charles?" she said. "We don't have any Charles in the kindergarten."

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *(to) renounce (He renounced corduroy overalls.)*: He gave up wearing clothing designed for very young children.
2. *swaggering*: an arrogant manner of walking
3. *raucous*: loud, harsh, rough, noisy
4. *insolently*: impolitely, rudely
5. *(to) take the name of the Lord in vain*: swear or curse; use bad language; blaspheme
6. *fresh*: disrespectful; impudent; bold and outspoken
7. *(to) spank*: punish by striking or slapping on the buttocks
8. *cookie*: a small, crisp, sweet cake baked in the oven
9. *dumb*: stupid, unintelligent
10. *seesaw*: a wooden plank or board that goes up and down
11. *(to) yell*: shout; scream loudly
12. *rubbers*: thin rubber overshoes to protect leather shoes from rain and mud
13. *institution*: something or someone well-established in some customary relationship; a habit or custom
14. *incredulously*: showing disbelief, unwilling to believe
15. *cynically*: distrustfully; sarcastically
16. *P.T.A. meeting*: A meeting of the Parents and Teachers Association. All schools in the United States have an organization of parents and teachers.
17. *matronly*: pertaining to, or having the characteristics of, a middle-aged married woman
18. *haggard*: tired-looking; weary and care-worn
19. *(to) maneuver (We maneuvered up to one another)*: We managed to move skillfully through the crowd of people.
20. *lapses*: interludes; backsliding; omissions; slips
21. *(to) have your hands full*: be very busy; be occupied with many things

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What kind of family life is pictured in this story? (How do Laurie's parents behave toward each other and to Laurie? How does Laurie behave toward them?)*
2. *What are some of Laurie's characteristics? In your opinion, does he seem to be a happy child? Explain.*
3. *How does Laurie let his parents know what kind of person Charles is? Describe Charles.*
4. *What similarities, and differences do you find in the family life described in this story and family life as you know it?*
5. *How does the teacher in the story deal with Charles? Do you agree with her methods? Explain.*

For my Sister Molly who in the fifties

ALICE WALKER

The poet remembers the role her sister played in her life when she was young. Her narrative traces the changes in their relationship as the years passed.

Once made a fairy rooster from
Mashed potatoes
Whose eyes I forget
But green onions were his tail
And his two legs were carrot sticks
A tomato slice his crown.
Who came home on vacation
When the sun was hot and cooked and cleaned
And minded least of all
The children's questions
A million or more
Pouring in on her
Who had been to school
And knew (and told us too) that certain
Words were no longer good
And taught me not to say us for we
No matter what "Sonny said" up the
road.

FOR MY SISTER MOLLY WHO IN THE FIFTIES

Knew Hamlet well and read into the night
And coached me in my songs of Africa
A continent I never knew
But learned to love
Because "they" she said could carry
A tune
And spoke in accents never heard
In Eatonton.
Who read from *Prose and Poetry*
And loved to read "Sam McGee from Tennessee"
On nights the fire was burning low
And Christmas wrapped in angel hair
And I for one prayed for snow.

WHO IN THE FIFTIES

Knew all the written things that made
Us laugh and stories by
The hour   Waking up the story buds
Like fruit. Who walked among the flowers
And brought them inside the house
And smelled as good as they
And looked as bright.
Who made dresses, braided
Hair. Moved chairs about
Hung things from walls
Ordered baths
Frowned on wasp bites
And seemed to know the endings
Of all the tales
I had forgot.

WHO OFF INTO THE UNIVERSITY

Went exploring   To London and
To Rotterdam
Prague and to Liberia
Bringing back the news to us
Who knew none of it
But followed crops and weather
funerals and
Methodist Homecoming;
Easter speeches,
groaning church.

WHO FOUND ANOTHER WORLD

Another life   With gentlefolk
Far less trusting
And moved and moved and changed
Her name
And sounded precise
When she spoke   And frowned away
Our sloppishness.

WHO SAW US SILENT
Cursed with fear   A love burning
Inexpressible
And sent me money not for me
But for "College."
Who saw me grow through letters
The words misspelled   But not
The longing   Stretching
Growth
The tied and twisting
Tongue
Feet no longer bare
Skin no longer burnt against
The cotton.

WHO BECAME SOMEONE OVERHEAD
A light   A thousand watts
Bright and also blinding
And saw my brothers cloddish[3]
And me destined to be
Wayward[4]
My mother remote   My father
A wearisome farmer
With heartbreaking
Nails.

FOR MY SISTER MOLLY WHO IN THE FIFTIES
Found much
Unbearable
Who walked where few had
Understood   And sensed our
Groping[5] after light
And saw some extinguished
And no doubt mourned.

FOR MY SISTER MOLLY WHO IN THE FIFTIES
Left us.

NOTES ON THE POEM

1. *angel hair:* silky cotton-like fiber derived from glass
2. *changed her name:* With the Black Muslim movement in the 1950s, some African Americans adopted new names that represented their African heritage
3. *cloddish:* ignorant of proper ways of acting
4. *wayward:* unruly; doing the opposite of what is desired.
5. *groping:* searching blindly

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What joyful memories does Alice Walker have of her sister?*
2. *How does Molly change after she goes to the university?*
3. *What images in the poem arouse your imagination?*
4. *Was there anyone like Molly in your life? Explain.*
5. *How is the sibling relationship described in this poem different from the relationships described in the short story "Sweet Potato Pie"* (pp. 76)

Going Home

WILLIAM SAROYAN

Nearly everyone looks forward to returning home, and the young man in this story is no different. He recalls the sights and sounds, and even the tastes and smells of his childhood; and they arouse memories of good times passed. Now that he has returned, will those good times begin again?

This valley, he thought, all this country between the mountains is mine, home to me, the place I dream about, and everything is the same, not a thing is changed, water sprinklers still splash in circles over lawns of Bermuda grass, good old home town, simplicity, reality.

Walking along Alvin Street he felt glad to be home again. Everything was fine, common and good, the smell of earth, cooking suppers, smoke, the rich summer air of the valley full of plant growth, grapes growing, peaches ripening, and the oleander bush swooning with sweetness, the same as ever. He breathed deeply, drawing the smell of home deep into his lungs, smiling inwardly. It was hot. He hadn't felt his senses reacting to the earth so cleanly and clearly for years; now it was a pleasure even to breathe. The cleanliness of the air sharpened the moment so that, walking, he felt the magnificence of being, glory of possessing substance, of having form and motion and intellect, the piety of merely being alive on the earth.

Water, he thought, hearing the soft splash of a lawn sprinkler; to taste the water of home, the full cool water of the valley, to have that simple thirst and that solid water with which to quench it, fulfillment, the clarity of life. He saw an old man holding a hose over some geranium plants, and his thirst sent him to the man.

"Good evening," he said quietly; "may I have a drink?"

The old man turned slowly, his shadow large against the house, to look into the young man's face, amazed and pleased. "You bet," he said; "here," and he placed the hose into the young man's hands. "Mighty fine water," said the old man, "this water of the San Joaquin valley; best yet, I guess. That water up in Frisco makes me sick; ain't got no taste. And down in Los Angeles, why, the water tastes like castor oil; I can't understand how so many people go on living there year after year."

While the old man talked, he listened to the water falling from the hose to the earth, leaping thickly, cleanly, sinking swiftly into the earth. "You said it,"[4] he said to the old man; "you said it; our water is the finest water on earth."

He curved his head over the spouting water and began to drink. The sweet rich taste of the water amazed him, and as he drank, he thought, God, this is splendid. He could feel the cool water splashing into his being, refreshing and cooling him. Losing his breath, he lifted his head, saying to the old man, "We're mighty lucky, us folk in the valley."

He bent his head over the water again and began again to swallow the splashing liquid, laughing to himself with delight. It seemed as if he couldn't get enough of it into his system; the more he drank, the finer the water tasted to him and the more he wanted to drink.

The old man was amazed. "You drunk about two quarts," he said.

Still swallowing the water, he could hear the old man talking, and he lifted his head again, replying, "I guess so. It sure tastes fine." He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, still holding the hose, still wanting to drink more. The whole valley was in that water, all the clarity, all the genuineness, all the goodness and simplicity and reality.

"Man alive,"[5] said the old man. "You sure was thirsty. How long since you had a drink, anyway?"

"Two years," he replied. "I mean two years since I had a drink of this water. I been away, traveling around. I just got back. I was born here, over on G Street in Russian town; you know, across the Southern Pacific"[6] tracks; been away two years and I just got back. Mighty fine too, let me tell you, to be back. I like this place. I'm going to get a job and settle down."

He hung his head over the water again and took several more swallows; then he handed the hose to the old man.

"You sure was thirsty," said the old man. "I ain't never seen anybody anywhere drink so much water at one time. It sure looked good seeing you swallow all that water."

He went on walking down Alvin Street, humming to himself, the old man staring at him.

Nice to be back, the young man thought; greatest mistake I ever made, coming back this way.

Everything he had ever done had been a mistake, and this was one of the good mistakes. He had come south from San Francisco without even thinking of going home; he had thought of going as far south as Merced,[7] stopping there awhile, and then going back, but once he had got into the country, it had been too much. It had been great fun standing on the highway in his city clothes, hitchhiking.

One little city after another, and here he was walking through the streets of his home town, at seven in the evening. It was great, very amusing; and the water, splendid.

He wasn't far from town, the city itself, and he could see one or two of the taller buildings, the Pacific Gas & Electric Building, all lit up with colored lights, and another, a taller one, that he hadn't seen before. That's a new one, he thought; they put up that one while I was away; things must be booming.[8]

He turned down Fulton Street and began walking into town. It looked great from where he was, far away and nice and small, very genuine, a real quiet little town, the kind of place to live in, settle down in, marry in, have home, kids, a job, and all the rest of it. It was all he wanted. The air of the valley and the water and the reality of the whole place, the cleanliness of life in the valley, the simplicity of the people.

In the city everything was the same: the names of the stores, the people walking in the streets, and the slow passing of automobiles; boys in cars trying to pick up girls; same as ever, not a thing changed. He saw faces he had known as a boy, people he did not know by name, and then he saw Tony Rocca, his old pal, walking up the street toward him, and he saw that Tony recognized him. He stopped walking, waiting for Tony to come into his presence. It was like a meeting in a dream, strange, almost incredible. He had dreamed of the two of them playing hooky[9] from school to go swimming, to go out to the county fair, to sneak into a moving-picture theater; and now here he was again, a big fellow with a lazy, easy-going walk, and a genial Italian grin. It was good, and he was glad he had made the mistake and come back.

He stopped walking, waiting for Tony to come into his presence, smiling at him, unable to speak. The two boys shook hands and then began to strike one another with affection, laughing loudly, swearing[10] at one another. "Where the hell have you been?" Tony said; and he punched[11] his friend in the stomach, laughing loudly.

"Old Tony," he said, "good old punchdrunk[12] Tony. God, it's good to see you. I thought maybe you'd be dead by this time. What the hell have you been doing?" He dodged[13] another punch and struck his friend in the chest. He swore in Italian at Tony, using words Tony had taught him years ago, and Tony swore back at him in Russian.

"I've got to go out to the house," he said at last. "The folks don't know I'm here. I've got to go out and see them. I'm dying to see my brother Paul."

He went on down the street, smiling about Tony. They would be having a lot of good times together again; they might even go swimming again the way they did as kids. It was great to be back.

Walking by stores, he thought of buying his mother a small gift. A little gift would please the old lady. But he had little money, and all the decent things were expensive. I'll get her something later, he thought.

He turned west on Tulare Street, crossing the Southern Pacific tracks, reached G Street, then turned south. In a few minutes he would be home again, at the door of the little old house; the same as ever; the old woman, the old man, his three sisters, and his kid brother, all of them in the house, living simple lives.

He saw the house from a distance of about a block, and his heart began to jump. He felt suddenly ill and afraid, something he had forgotten about the place, about that life which he had always hated, something ugly and mean. But he walked on, moving slower as he came closer to the house. The fence had fallen and no one had fixed it. The house suddenly appeared to be very ugly, and he wondered why in the hell the old man didn't move to a better house in a better neighborhood. Seeing the house again, feeling all its old reality, all his hatred for it returned, and he began to feel again the longing to be away from it, where he could not see it. He began to feel, as he had felt as a boy, the deep inarticulate[14] hatred he had for the whole city, its falseness, its meanness, the stupidity of its people, the emptiness of their minds, and it seemed to him that he would never be able to return to such a place. The water; yes, it was good, it was splendid; but there were other things.

He walked slowly before the house, looking at it as if he might be a stranger, feeling alien[15] and unrelated to it, yet feeling that it was home, the place he dreamed about, the place that tormented him wherever he went. He was afraid someone might come out of the house and see him, because he knew that if he was seen, he might find himself running away. Still, he wanted to see them, all of them, have them before his eyes, feel the full presence of their bodies, even smell them, that old strong Russian smell. But it was too much. He began to feel hatred for everything in the city, and he walked on, going to the corner. There he stood beneath the street lamp, bewildered[16] and disgusted, wanting to see his brother Paul, to talk to the boy, find out what was going on in his mind, how he was taking it, being in such a place, living such a life. He knew how it had been with him when he had been his brother's age, and he hoped he might be able to give his brother a little advice, how to keep from feeling the monotony[17] and the ugliness by reading.

He forgot that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, and that he had been dreaming for months of eating another of his mother's meals, sitting at the old table in the kitchen, seeing her, large and red-faced and serious and angry toward him, loving him, but he had lost his appetite. He thought he might wait at the corner; perhaps his brother would leave the house to take a walk and he would see the boy and talk to him. Paul, he would say, and he would talk to the boy in Russian.

The stillness of the valley began to oppress[18] him, losing its piety, becoming merely a form of the valley's monotony.

Still, he couldn't go away from the house. From the corner he could see it, and he knew that he wanted to go in and be among his people, a part of their lives; he knew this was what he had wanted to do for months, to knock at the door, embrace his mother and his sisters, walk across the floors of the house, sit in the old chairs, sleep in his bed, talk with his old man, eat at the table.

And now something he had forgotten while he had been away, something real but ugly in that life, had come up swiftly, changing everything, changing the appearance and meaning of the house, the city, the whole valley, making it all ugly and unreal, making him wish to go away and never return. He could never come back. He could never enter the house again and go on with his life where he had left off.

Suddenly he was in the alley, climbing over the fence, walking through the yard. His mother had planted tomatoes, and peppers, and the smell of the growing plants was thick and acrid[19] and very melancholy to him. There was a light in the kitchen, and he moved quietly toward it, hoping to see some of them without being seen. He walked close to the house, to the kitchen window, and looking in saw his youngest sister, Martha, washing dishes. He saw the old table, the old stove, and Martha, with her back turned to him; and all these things seemed so sad and so pathetic that tears came to his eyes, and he began to need a cigarette. He struck a match quietly on the bottom of his shoe and inhaled the smoke, looking at his little sister in the old house, a part of the monotony. Everything seemed very still, very clear, terribly sad; but he hoped his mother would enter the kitchen; he wanted to have another look at her. He wanted to see if his being away had changed her much. How would she look? Would she have that angry look? He felt angry with himself for not being a good son, for not trying to make his mother happy, but he knew it was impossible.

He saw his brother Paul enter the kitchen for a drink of water, and for a moment he wanted to cry out the boy's name, everything that was good in him, all his love, rushing to the face and form of the boy; but he restrained himself, inhaling deeply, tightening his lips. In the kitchen, the boy seemed lost, bewildered, imprisoned. Looking at his brother, he began to cry softly.

He no longer wished to see his mother. He would become so angry that he would do something crazy. He walked quietly through the yard, hoisted[20] himself over the fence, and jumped to the alley. He began to walk away, his grief mounting in him. When he was far enough away not to be heard, he began to sob, loving them passionately and hating the ugliness and monotony of their lives. He felt himself hurrying away from home, from his people, crying bitterly in the darkness of the clear night, weeping because there was nothing he could do, not one confounded thing.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *You bet*: Yes; of course; sure
2. *San Joaquin*: A river in central California
3. *Frisco* = San Francisco
4. *You said it*: I agree with what you said
5. *Man alive*: an exclamation showing surprise
6. *Southern Pacific*: a railroad line
7. *Merced*: A city in central California
8. *booming*: prospering economically
9. *playing hooky*: unapproved absence from school
10. *swearing*: using bad language
11. *punching*: hit with one's fist (in this case in a playful manner)
12. *punchdrunk*: a term applied to boxers in reference to their slow reactions and unclear speech brought on by too many blows taken to their head during fights
13. *dodge*: avoid
14. *inarticulate*: not spoken about
15. *alien*: strange
16. *bewildered*: confused
17. *monotony*: a dull condition where nothing changes
18. *oppress*: (to) burden or make unpleasant
19. *acrid*: sharp
20. *hoisted*: lifted

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Why did the young man return to his home town? Does the author provide a direct explanation or is one implied?*
2. *The old man and the young man speak a colloquial variety of American English that is sometimes ungrammatical. Find three examples of colloquial usages in their conversation and give a standard English equivalent of the colloquialism.*
3. *What do you think the young man means by thinking that coming home was the "greatest mistake" he had ever made?*
4. *The story might be divided into two sections: one before the young man sees the house and the other after. How does the author use the young man's attitude toward the city, the people, and the young man's family to establish a mood in each section? Find specific examples of how they are descriptively treated in each section.*
5. *What advice did the young man want to give his brother? Why?*

Bridging

MAX APPLE

In this short story a widowed father tries to redefine his relationship with his daughter Jessica. While he becomes involved in activities of girls her age, Jessica remains apart, hoping to keep her relationship with her father the same as it was when her mother was alive.

At the Astrodome,[1] Nolan Ryan is shaving the corners.[2]

He's going through the Giants[3] in order. The radio announcer is not even mentioning that, through the sixth,[4] the Giants, haven't had a hit. The Ks[5] mount. Tonight, Nolan passes the Big Train[6] and becomes the all-time strikeout king.[7] Ryan is almost as old as I am, and he still throws nothing but smoke. His fast ball is an aspirin; batters seem to tear their tendons lunging for his curve.

My daughter, Jessica, and I have season tickets, but tonight she's home listening and I'm in the basement of St. Anne's Church, watching Kay Randall's fingertips. Kay is holding her hands out from her chest, her fingertips touching. Her fingers move a little as she talks, and I can hear her nails click when they meet. That's how close I'm sitting.

Kay is talking about "bridging"; that's what her arched fingers represent.

"Bridging," she says, "is the way Brownies[8] become Girl Scouts.[9] It's a slow, steady process. It's not easy, but we allow a whole year for bridging."

Eleven girls in brown jumpers, with orange ties at their necks, are imitating Kay as she talks. They hold their stumpy, chewed fingertips out and bridge them; so do I.

I brought the paste tonight, and the stick-on gold stars, and the thread for sewing buttonholes.

"I feel a little awkward," Kay Randall said on the phone, "asking a man to do these errands…but that's my problem, not yours. Just bring the supplies and try to be at the church meeting room a few minutes before seven."

I arrived a half hour early.

"You're off your rocker," Jessica said. She begged me to drop her at the Astrodome on my way to the Girl Scout meeting. "After the game, I'll meet you at the main souvenir stand on the first level. They stay open an hour after the game. I'll be all right. There are cops and ushers every five yards."

She can't believe that I am missing this game to perform my functions as an assistant Girl Scout leader. Our Girl Scout battle has been going on for two months.

"Girl Scouts is stupid," Jessica says. "Who wants to sell cookies and sew buttons and walk around wearing stupid old badges."

When she agreed to go to the first meeting, I was so happy that I volunteered to become an assistant leader. After the meeting, Jessica went directly to the car, the way she does after school, after a birthday party, after a ball game, after anything. A straight line to the car. No jabbering with girlfriends, no smiles, no dallying, just right to the car. She slid into the bad seat, belted in, and braced herself for destruction.

I shrugged aside a thousand years of stereotypes[10] and accepted my assistant leader's packet and credentials.

"I'm sure there have been other men in the movement," Kay said. "We just haven't had any in our district. It will be good for the girls."

Not for my Jessica. She won't bridge, she won't budge.

"I know why you're doing this," she said. "You think that because I don't have a mother, Kay Randall and the Girl Scouts will help me. That's crazy. And I know that Sharon is supposed to be like a mother, too. Why don't you just leave me alone."

Sharon is Jessica's therapist. Jessica sees her twice a week. Sharon and I have a meeting once a month.

"We have a lot of shy girls," Kay Randall told me. "Scouting brings them out. Believe me, it's hard to stay shy when you're nine years old and you're sharing a tent with four other girls. You have to count on each other, you have to communicate."

I imagined Jessica zipping up her sleeping bag, mumbling good night to anyone who said it to her first, and then closing her eyes and hating me for sending her out among the happy.

"She likes all sports, especially baseball," I told my leader.

"There's room for baseball in scouting," Kay said. Once a year, the whole district goes to a game. They mention us on the big scoreboard."

"Jessica and I go to all the home games. We're real fans."

Kay smiled.

"That's why I want her in Girl Scouts. You know, I want her to go to things with her girlfriends, instead of always hanging around with me at ball games."

"I understand," Kay said, "it's part of bridging."

With Sharon, the word is "separation anxiety."[11] That's the fast ball;[12] "bridging"[13] is the curve.[14] Amid all their magic words, I feel as if Jessica and I were standing at home plate blindfolded.

While I await Kay and the members of Troop 111, District 6, I eye Saint Anne in her grotto and Saint Gregory and Saint Thomas.[15] Their hands are folded as if they started out bridging and ended up praying.

In October, the principal sent Jessica home from school because Mrs. Simmons caught her in spelling class listening to the World Series through an earphone.

"It's against the school policy," Mrs. Simmons said. "Jessica understands school policy. We confiscate[16] radios and send the child home."

"I'm glad," Jessica said. "It was a cheap-o radio.[17] Now I can watch TV with you."

They sent her home in the middle of the sixth game. I let her stay home for the seventh, too.

The Brewers[18] are her favorite American League team.[19] She likes Rollie Fingers, and especially Robin Yount.

"Does Yount go in the hole better than Harvey Kuenn[20] used to?"

"You bet," I told her. "Kuenn was never a great fielder, but he could hit .300[21] with his eyes closed."

Kuenn was the Brewers' manager. He has an artificial leg and could barely make it up the dugout steps, but when I was Jessica's age and the Tigers[22] were my team, Kuenn used to stand at the plate, tap the corners with his bat, spit some tobacco juice, and knock liners up the alley.

She took it hard when the Brewers lost.

"If Fingers hadn't been hurt they would have squashed the Cards,[23] wouldn't they?"

I agreed.

"But, I'm glad for Andujar."[24]

We had Andujar's autograph. Once, we met him at a McDonald's. He was a relief pitcher then, and an erratic right-hander, though in St. Louis he improved. I was happy to get his name on a napkin. Jessica shook his hand.

One night, after I had read her a story, she said, "Daddy, if we were rich, could we go to the away games, too? I mean, if you didn't have to be at work every day?"

"Probably we could," I said, "but wouldn't it get boring? We'd have to stay at hotels and eat in restaurants.

Even the players get sick of it."

"Are you kidding," she said. "I'd never get sick of it."

"Jessica has fantasies of being with you forever, following baseball or whatever," Sharon says. "All she's trying to do is please you. Since she lost her mother, she feels that you and she are alone in the world. She doesn't want to let anyone or anything else into that unit, the two of you. She's afraid of any more losses. And, of course, her greatest worry is about losing you."

"You know," I tell Sharon, "that's pretty much how I feel too."

"Of course it is," she says. "I'm glad to hear you say it."

Sharon is glad to hear me say almost anything. When I explain that her $100-a-week fee would buy a lot of peanut-butter sandwiches, she says she is "glad to hear" me expressing my anger.

"Sharon's not fooling me," Jessica says. "I know that she thinks drawing those pictures is supposed to make me feel better or something. You're just wasting your money. There's nothing wrong with me."

"It's a long, difficult, expensive process," Sharon says. "You and Jessica have lost a lot. Jessica is going to have to learn to trust the world again. It would help if you could do it, too."

So I decide to trust Girl Scouts. First Girl Scouts, then the world. I make my stand at the meeting of Kay Randall's Fingertips. While Nolan Ryan breaks Walter Johnson's strikeout record and pitches a two-hit shutout, I hand paste and thread to nine-year-olds who are sticking and sewing their lives together in ways Jessica and I can't.

Scouting is not altogether new to me. I was a Cub Scout. I owned a blue beanie, and I remember my den mother, Mrs. Clark, very well. A den mother made perfect sense to me then, and still does. Maybe that's why I don't feel uncomfortable being a Girl Scout assistant leader.

We had no den father. Mr. Clark was only a photograph on a wall in the tiny living room where we held our weekly meetings. Mr. Clark had been killed in the Korean War. His son, John, was in the troop. John was stocky, but Mrs. Clark was huge. She couldn't sit on a regular chair, only on a couch or a stool without sides. She was the cashier in the convenience store beneath their apartment. The story we heard was that Walt, the old man who owned the store, felt sorry for her and gave her the job. He was her landlord, too. She sat on a swivel stool and rang up the purchases.

We met at the store and watched while she locked the door; then we followed her up the steep staircase to her three-room apartment. She carried two wet glass bottles of milk. Her body took up the entire width of the staircase. She passed the banisters the way trucks pass each other on a narrow highway.

We were ten years old, a time when everything is funny, especially fat people. But I don't remember ever laughing about Mrs. Clark. She had great dignity and character, and so did John. I didn't know what to call it then, but I knew John was someone you could always trust.

She passed out milk and cookies; then John collected the cups and washed them. They didn't have a television set. The only decoration in the room that barely held all of us was Mr. Clark's picture on the wall. We saw him in his uniform, and we knew he had died in Korea defending his country. We were little boys in blue beanies, drinking milk in the apartment of a hero. Through that aura I came to scouting. I wanted Kay Randall to have all of Mrs. Clark's dignity.

When she takes a deep breath and then bridges, Kay Randall has noticeable armpits. Her wide shoulders narrow into a tiny rib cage. Her armpits are like bridges. She says "bridging" as if it were a mantra, holding her hands before her for about thirty seconds at the start of each meeting.

"A promise is a promise," I told Jessica. "I signed up to be a leader and I'm going to do it, with you or without you."

"But you didn't even ask me if I liked it. You just signed up without talking it over."

"That's true. That's why I'm not going to force you to go along. It was my choice."

"What can you like about it? I hate Melissa Randall. She always has a cold."

"Her mother is a good leader."

"How do you know?"

"She's my boss. I have to like her, don't I?"

I hugged Jessica. "C'mon, honey, give it a chance. What do you have to lose?"

"If you make me go I'll do it, but if I have a choice I won't."

Every other Tuesday, Maria, the fifteen-year-old Greek girl who lives on the corner, babysits Jessica while

I go to the Scout meetings. We talk about field trips and about how to earn merit badges. The girls giggle when Kay pins a "Ready Helpers" badge on me, my first merit award.

Jessica thinks it's hilarious. She tells me to wear it to work.

Sometimes, when I watch Jessica brush her hair and tie her ponytail and make her lunch, I start to think that maybe I should just relax and stop the therapy and the scouting and all my not-so-subtle attempts to get her to invite friends over. I start to think that, in spite of everything, she's a good student and she's got a sense of humor. She's barely nine years old; she'll grow up, just as everyone does. John Clark did it without a father; she'll do it without a mother. I start to wonder if Jessica seems to the girls in her class what John Clark seemed to me: dignified, serious, almost an adult, even while we were playing I admired him; maybe the girls in her class admire her. But John had that hero on the wall, his father in a uniform, dead for reasons John and all the rest of us understood. My Jessica had to explain a neurological disease that she couldn't even pronounce. "I hate it when people ask me about Mom," she said. "I just tell them she fell off the Empire State Building."

Before our first field trip, I go to Kay's house for a planning session. We're going to collect wildflowers in East Texas. It's a one-day trip; I arranged to rent the school bus.

I told Jessica that she could go on the trip even though she wasn't a member, but she refused.

We sit on colonial furniture in Kay's den. She brings in coffee and we go over the list of sachet supplies.[30] Another troop is joining ours, so there will be a bus load among the bluebonnets—twenty-two girls, three women, and me.

"We have to be sure the girls understand that the bluebonnets they pick are on private land and that we have permission to pick them. Otherwise, they might go pick them from along the roadside, which is against the law."

I imagine all twenty-two of them behind bars for picking bluebonnets, and Jessica laughing while I scramble for bail money.

I keep noticing Kay's hands. I notice them as she pours coffee. As she checks off the items on the list, as she gestures. I keep expecting her to bridge. She has large, solid, confident hands. When she finishes bridging, I sometimes feel like clapping, the way people do after the national anthem.

"I admire you," she tells me. "I admire you for going ahead with Scouts even though your daughter rejects it. She'll get a lot out of it indirectly, from you."

Kay is thirty-three, divorced, and has two daughters. One is a Blue Bird;[31] the older, Melissa, is one of the stubby-fingered girls. Jessica is right; Melissa always has a cold.

Kay teaches fifth grade and has been divorced for three years. I am the first assistant she's ever had.

"My husband, Bill, never helped with Scouts," Kay says. "He was pretty much turned off to everything except his business and drinking. When we separated, I can't honestly say I missed him; he'd never been there. I don't think the girls miss him, either. He only sees them about once a month. He has girlfriends, and his business is doing very well. I guess he has what he wants."

"And you?"

She uses one of those wonderful hands to move the hair away from her eyes, a gesture that makes her seem very young.

"I guess I do, too. I've got the girls and my job. I'm lonesome though."

We both think about what might have been as we sit beside her glass coffee pot with our lists of supplies that the girls will need to make sachets with their flowers. If she were Barbra Streisand and I were Robert Redford,[32] and the music started playing in the background to give us a clue, and there were a long close-up of our lips, we might just fade into middle age together. But Melissa calls for Mom, because her mosquito bite is bleeding where she has scratched it. And I have an angry daughter waiting at home for me. All Kay and I have in common is Girl Scouts. We are both smart enough to know it. When Kay looks at me before going to put alcohol on the mosquito bite, our mutual sadness drips from us like the last drops of coffee through the grounds.

"You really missed something tonight," Jessica tells me. The Astros did a double steal. I've never seen one before. In the fourth, they sent both Thon and Moreno, and Moreno stole home." She knows batting averages and won-lost percentages, too, just like the older boys. But they go out to play; Jessica stays in and waits for me.

During the field trip, while the girls pick the flowers, I think about Jessica at home, probably beside the radio. Juana, our once-a-week cleaning lady, agreed to work on

Saturday so that she could stay with Jessica while I took the all-day field trip.

It was no small event. In the eight months since Vicki had died, I had not yet gone away for an entire day.

I made waffles[33] in the waffle iron for Jessica before I left, but she hardly ate. "If you want anything, just ask Juana."

"Juana doesn't speak English."

"She understands; that's enough."

"Maybe for you it's enough."

"Honey, I told you, you can come. There's plenty of room on the bus. It's not too late for you to change your mind."

"It's not too late for you, either. There's going to be plenty of other leaders there. You don't have to go. You're just doing this to be mean to me."

I was ready for this. I had spent an hour with Sharon steeling myself. "Before she can leave you," Sharon said, "you'll have to show her that you can leave. Nothing's going to happen to her. And don't let her be sick that day."

Jessica is too smart to pull the "I don't feel good" routine. Instead, she became more silent and more unhappy-looking than usual. She stayed in her pajamas while I washed the dishes and got ready to leave.

I hadn't noticed the sadness as it was coming upon Jessica. It must have happened gradually, in the years of Vicki's decline, the years when I paid so little attention to my daughter. At times, Jessica seemed to recognize the truth more than I did.

As my Scouts picked their wildflowers, I remembered the last outing I had planned for Jessica, Vicki, and me. It was to have been a Fourth of July picnic with some friends in Austin. I stopped at the bank and withdrew $150 in cash for the long weekend. But when I came home, Vicki was too sick to move and the air-conditioner had broken. I called our friends to cancel the picnic; then I took Jessica and me to the mall to buy a fan. I bought the biggest one they had, a fifty-eight-inch model that sounded like a hurricane. It could cool 10,000 square feet, but it wasn't enough. Vicki was home sitting blankly in front of the TV set. The fan could move eight tons of air an hour, but I wanted it to save my wife. I wanted a fan that would blow the whole earth out of its orbit.

I had $50 left. I gave it to Jessica and told her to buy anything she wanted.

"Whenever you're sad, Daddy, you want to buy me things." She put the money back in my pocket. "It won't help." She was seven years old, holding my hand tightly in the appliance department at J. C. Penney's.

I watched Melissa sniffle among the wildflowers, and I identified various flowers for Carol and JoAnn and Sue and Linda and Rebecca, who were by now used to me and treated me pretty much as they treated Kay. I noticed that the flower book they were using had very accurate photographs, making it easy to identify the blue bonnets and buttercups and poppies. The Scouts also found several varieties of wild grasses.

We were only seventy miles from home, on some land a healthy rancher had long ago donated to the Girl Scouts. The girls, bending among the flowers, seemed to have been quickly transformed by the colorful meadow. The gigglers and monotonous singers on the bus were now, like the bees, sucking strength from the beauty around them. Kay was in the midst of them, and so, I realized, was I, not watching and keeping score and admiring from a distance, but participating, becoming a player.

JoAnn and Carol sneaked up from behind me and dropped some dandelions down my back. I chased them; then I helped the other leaders pour the Kool-Aid and distribute the Baggies[34] and the name tags for each girl's flowers.

My daughter is home listening to a ball game, I thought, and I'm out here having fun with nine-year-olds. My life is upside down.

When I came home, with dandelion fragments still on my back, Juana had cleaned the house and I could smell the taco sauce in the kitchen. Jessica was in her room. I suspected that she had spent the day listless and tearful, although I had urged her to invite a friend over.

"I had a lot of fun, honey, but I missed you."

She hugged me and cried against my shoulder. I felt like holding her the way I used to when she was an infant, then I had rocked her to sleep. But she was a big girl now, and she needed not sleep but wakefulness.

"I heard on the news that the Rockets[35] signed Ralph Sampson,"[36] she sobbed, "and you hardly ever take me to any pro basketball games."

"But if they have a new center, things will be different. With Sampson, we'll be contenders. Sure, I'll take you."

"Promise?"

"Promise." I promise to take you everywhere, my lovely child, and then to leave you. I'm learning to be leader.

NOTES ON THE SHORT STORY

1. *Astrodome*: professional baseball stadium where the Houston Astros play
2. *Nolan Ryan is shaving the corners*: the pitcher is throwing the ball at an extremely fast pace
3. *Giants*: name of the baseball team
4. *sixth*: the sixth inning in the baseball game (total of 9 innings)
5. *Ks*: name of the competing baseball team
6. *the Big Train*: nickname for baseball player Walter Johnson
7. *all-time strikeout king*: record-holder for "striking" players out, or throwing the ball in such a skillful manner that they cannot hit it
8. *Brownies*: a branch of the Girl Scouts organization for girls aged 6-8
9. *Girl Scouts*: a scouting program for girls in which they learn practical skills for cooking, camping, etc., as well as leadership and other positive values
10. *"I shrugged aside a thousand years of stereotypes."* I ignored the fact that assistant leaders of Girl Scouts are usually women
11. *"separation anxiety"*: fear of leaving one you love
12. *fast ball*: metaphor to describe something that's difficult to overcome
13. *"bridging"*: bonding
14. *curve*: a ball pitched so that it deviates from a normal or expected course
15. *I eye Saint Anne in her grotto and Saint Gregory and Saint Thomas*: I notice the statues of the Christian saints on display
16. *confiscate*: to seize as if by authority
17. *cheap-o-radio*: not of good quality
18. *Brewers*: Milwaukee, Wisconsin's baseball team
19. *American League Team*: of the two leagues in American professional baseball
20. *Harvey Kuenn*: former baseball star
21. *hit .300*: of all the times the player was at bat, he had a hit 30% of the time
22. *Tigers*: baseball team for Detroit, Michigan
23. *Cards*: baseball team for St. Louis, Missouri
24. *Andujar*: pitcher for the St. Louis team
25. *Walter Johnson's strikeout record*: Walter Johnson struck out more batters than any other pitcher in American baseball
26. *Cub Scout*: male version of the Girl Scouts (see #8)
27. *den mother*: the woman in charge of the activities of a den (a small group of Cub Scouts which meets separately from the large group)
28. *Korean War*: (1950 —1953) the conflict between North Korea and South
    Korea.
    in which American and U.N. soldiers fought on the side of South Korea
29. *mantra*: a verbal formula to invoke mystical powers
30. *sachet supplies*: scented materials to be put inside of fabric bags to give a pleasant smell to whatever they are placed near
31. *Blue Bird*: a scout member
32. *"If she were Barbra Streisand and I were Robert Redford"*: a reference to the intense lovers in the movie "The Way We Were"
33. *waffles*: a crisp cake of batter baked in a waffle iron
34. *Baggies*: brand-name for a small, transparent plastic bag
35. *Rockets*: name of professional basketball team
36. *Ralph Sampson*: professional basketball player

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What does "bridging" mean in the story? What different examples of bridging does the story give?*
2. *Describe Jessica? Why do you think she acts the way she does? Explain.*
3. *How well are the father and daughter coming to terms with the mother's death? Explain.*
4. *Why does the father remain active in Girl Scouts when Jessica is clearly uninterested?*
5. *What is the significance of the many sports figures who are mentioned in the story?*

Without Title

for my Father who lived without ceremony

DIANE GLANCY

A young Native American woman fondly remembers her father, who was uprooted from his native culture but lived with dignity in an alien setting.

It's hard you know without the buffalo,
the shaman,[1] the arrow,
but my father went out each day to hunt
as though he had them.
He worked in the stockyards.
All his life he brought us meat.
No one marked his first kill,
no one sang his buffalo song.[2]
Without a vision he had migrated to the city
and went to work in the packing house.[3]
When he brought home his horns and hides
my mother said
get rid of them.
I remember the animal tracks of his car
out the drive in snow and mud,
the aerial[4] on his old car waving
like a bow string.
I remember the silence of his lost power,
the red buffalo painted on his chest.
Oh, I couldn't see it
but it was there, and in the night I heard
his buffalo grunts like a snore. ◆

NOTES ON THE POEM

[1] *shaman*: the priest or "medicine man" in traditional Native American cultures who used magic to cure the sick and to control events

[2] *buffalo song*: ceremonial song marking the first kill of a buffalo by a young Native American male

[3] *packing house*: the place where meat is processed and packaged

[4] *aerial*: the aerial of a car radio

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. *What double meaning does the title have?*
2. *Describe the father's relationship with his wife and his daughter.*
3. *What metaphors can you find in the poem?*

Why I live at the P.O.

EUDORA WELTY

Sister works at the China Grove Post Office, and now as a result of the experiences she relates in this story, she lives at the P.O. too. In humorous terms, she describes the most dysfunctional of dysfunctional families. Do family members really act this way toward one another?

I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy and Uncle Rondo until my sister Stella-Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again. Mr. Whitaker! Of course I went with Mr. Whitaker first, when he first appeared here in China Grove, taking "Pose Yourself" photos, and Stella-Rondo broke us up. Told him I was one-sided.[1] Bigger on one-side than the other, 119 which is a deliberate, calculated falsehood: I'm the same. Stella-Rondo is exactly twelve months to the day younger than I am and for that reason she's spoiled.

She's always had anything in the world she wanted and then she'd throw it away. Papa-Daddy gave her this gorgeous Add-a-Pearl necklace when she was eight years old and she threw it away playing baseball when she was nine, with only two pearls.

So as soon as she got married and moved away from home the first thing she did was separate! From Mr. Whitaker! This photographer with the popeyes she said she trusted. Came home from one of those towns up in Illinois and to our complete surprise brought this child of two.

Mama said she like to make her drop dead for a second.[2] "Here you had this marvelous blonde child and never so much as wrote your mother a word about it," says Mama. "I'm thoroughly ashamed of you." But of course she wasn't.

Stella-Rondo just calmly takes off this hat, I wish you could see it. She says, "Why, Mama, Shirley-T.'s adopted, I can prove it."

"How?" says Mama, but all I says was, "H'm!" There I was over the hot stove, trying to stretch two chickens over five people and a completely unexpected child into the bargain, without one moment's notice.

"What do you mean 'H'm!'?" says Stella-Rondo, and Mama says, "I heard that, Sister."

I said that oh, I didn't mean a thing, only that whoever Shirley-T. was, she was the spit-image[3] of Papa-Daddy if he'd cut off his beard, which of course he'd never do in the world. Papa-Daddy's Mama's papa and sulks.

Stella-Rondo got furious! She said, "Sister, I don't need to tell you you got a lot of nerve and always did have and I'll thank you to make no future reference to my adopted child whatsoever."

"Very well," I said. "Very well, very well. Of course I noticed at once she looks like Mr. Whitaker's side too. That frown. She looks like a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy."[4]

"Well, all I can say is she isn't."

"She looks exactly like Shirley Temple to me," says Mama, but Shirley-T. just ran away from her.

So the first thing Stella-Rondo did at the table was turn Papa-Daddy against me.

"Papa-Daddy," she says. He was trying to cut up his meat. "Papa-Daddy!" I was taken completely by surprise. Papa-Daddy is about a million years old[5] and's got this long long beard. "Papa-Daddy, Sister says she fails to understand why you don't cut off your beard."

So Papa-Daddy lays down his knife and fork! He's real rich. Mama says he is, he says he isn't. So he says, "Have I heard correctly? You don't understand why I don't cut off my beard?"

"Why," I says, "Papa-Daddy, of course I understand, I did not say any such of a thing, the idea!"

He says, "Hussy!"[6]

I says, "Papa-Daddy, you know I wouldn't any more want you to cut off your beard than the man in the moon. It was the farthest thing from my mind! Stella-Rondo sat there and made that up while she was eating breast of chicken."

But he says, "So the postmistress fails to understand why I don't cut off my beard. Which job I got you through my influence with the government. 'Bird's nest' is that what you call it?"

Not that it isn't the next to smallest P.O. in the entire state of Mississippi.

I says, "Oh, Papa-Daddy," I says, "I didn't say any such of a thing, I never dreamed it was a bird's nest, I have always been grateful though this is the next to smallest P.O. in the state of Mississippi, and I do not enjoy being referred to as a hussy by my own grandfather."

But Stella-Rondo says, "Yes, you did say it too. Anybody in the world could of heard you, that had ears."

"Stop right there," says Mama, looking at her.

So I pulled my napkin straight back through the napkin ring and left the table.

As soon as I was out of the room Mama says, "Call her back, or she'll starve to death," but Papa-Daddy says, "This is the beard I started growing on the Coast when I was fifteen years old." He would of gone on till nightfall if Shirley-T. hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo.[7]

So Papa-Daddy says, "I am going out and lie in the hammock, and you can all sit here and remember my words: I'll never cut off my beard as long as I live, even one inch, and I don't appreciate it in you at all." Passed right by me in the hall and went straight out and got in the hammock.

It would be a holiday. It wasn't five minutes before Uncle Rondo suddenly appeared in the hall in one of Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimonos,[8] all cut on the bias, like something Mr. Whitaker probably thought was gorgeous.

"Uncle Rondo!" I says. "I didn't know who that was! Where are you going?"

"Sister," he says, "get out of my way, I'm poisoned."

"If you're poisoned stay away from Papa-Daddy," I says. "Keep out of the hammock. Papa-Daddy will certainly beat you on the head if you come within forty miles of him. He thinks I deliberately said he ought to cut off his beard after he got me the P.O., and I've told him and told him, and he acts like he just don't hear me. Papa-Daddy must of gone stone deaf."

"He picked a fine day to do it then," says Uncle Rondo, and before you could say "Jack Robinson"[9] flew out in the yard.

What he'd really done, he'd drunk another bottle of that prescription. He does it every single Fourth of July as sure as shooting, and it's horribly expensive. Then he falls over in the hammock and snores. So he insisted on zigzagging right on out to the hammock, looking like a half-wit.

Papa-Daddy woke up with this horrible yell and right there without moving an inch he tried to turn Uncle Rondo against me. I heard every word he said. Oh, he told Uncle Rondo I didn't learn to read till I was eight years old and he didn't see how in the world I ever got the mail put up at the P.O., much less read it all, and he said Uncle Rondo could only fathom the lengths he had gone to get me that job! And he said on the other hand he thought Stella-Rondo had a brilliant mind and deserved credit for getting out of town. All the time he was just lying there swinging as pretty as you please and looping out his beard, and poor Uncle Rondo was *pleading* with him to slow down the hammock, it was making him as dizzy as a witch to watch it. But that's what Papa-Daddy likes about a hammock. So Uncle Rondo was too dizzy to get turned against me for the time being. He's Mama's only brother and is a good case of a one-track mind.[10] Ask anybody. A certified pharmacist.

Just then I heard Stella-Rondo raising the upstairs window. While she was married she got this peculiar idea that it's cooler with the windows shut and locked. So she has to raise the window before she can make a soul hear her outdoors.

So she raises the window and says, *"Oh!"* You would have thought she was mortally wounded.

Uncle Rondo and Papa-Daddy didn't even look up, but kept right on with what they were doing. I had to laugh.

I flew up the stairs and threw the door open! I says, "What in the wide world's the matter, Stella-Rondo! You mortally wounded?"

"No," she says, "I am not mortally wounded but I wish you would do me the favor of looking out that window there and telling me what you see."

So I shade my eyes and look out the window.

"I see the front yard," I says.

"Don't you see any human beings? she says.

"I see Uncle Rondo trying to run Papa-Daddy out of the hammock. I says. "Nothing more. Naturally, it's so suffocating-hot in the house, with all the windows shut and locked, everybody who cares to stay in their right mind will have to go out and get in the hammock before the Fourth of July is over."

"Don't you notice anything different about Uncle Rondo?" asks Stella-Rondo.

"Why, no, except he's got on some terrible-looking flesh-colored contraption[11] I wouldn't be found dead in, is all I can see," I says.

"Never mind, you won't be found dead in it, because it happens to be part of my trousseau,[12] and Mr. Whitaker took several dozen photographs of me in it," says Stella-Rondo. "What on earth could Uncle Rondo mean by wearing part of my trousseau out in the broad open daylight without saying so much as 'Kiss my foot,' knowing I only got home this morning after my separation and hung my negligee up on the bathroom door, just as nervous as I could be?"

"I'm sure I don't know, and what do you expect me to do about it?" I says. "Jump out the window?"

"No, I expect nothing of the kind. I simply declare that Uncle Rondo looks like a fool in it, that's all," she says. "It makes me sick to my stomach."

"Well, he looks as good as he can," I says. "As good as anybody in reason could." I stood up for Uncle Rondo, please remember. And I said to Stella-Rondo, "I think I would do well not to criticize so freely if I were you and came home with a two-year-old child I had never said a word about, and no explanation whatever about my separation."

"I asked you the instant I entered this house not to refer one more time to my adopted child, and you gave me your word of honor you would not," was all Stella-Rondo would say, and started pulling out every one of her eyebrows with some cheap Kress tweezers.[13]

So I merely slammed the door behind me and went down and made some green-tomato pickle. Somebody had to do it. Of course Mama had turned both the Negroes loose;[14] she always said no earthly power could hold one anyway on the Fourth of July, so she wouldn't even try. It turned out that Jaypan fell in the lake and came within a very narrow limit of drowning.

So Mama trots in. Lifts up the lid and says, "H'm! Not very good for your Uncle Rondo in his precarious condition, I must say. Or poor little adopted Shirley-T. Shame on you!"

That made me tired. I says, "Well, Stella-Rondo had better thank her lucky stars it was her instead of me came trotting in with that very peculiar-looking child. Now if it had been me that trotted in from Illinois and brought a peculiar-looking child of two, I shudder to think of the reception I'd of got, much less controlled the diet of an entire family."

"But you must remember, Sister, that you were never married to Mr. Whitaker in the first place and didn't go up to Illinois to live," says Mama, shaking a spoon in my face. "If you had I would of been just as overjoyed to see you and your little adopted girl as I was to see Stella Rondo, when you wound up with your separation and came on back home."

"You would not," I says.

"Don't contradict me, I would," says Mama.

But I said she couldn't convince me though she talked till she was blue in the face. Then I said, "Besides, you know as well as I do that that child is not adopted."

"She most certainly is adopted," says Mama, stiff as a poker.

I says, "Why, Mama, Stella-Rondo had her just as sure as anything in this world and just too stuck up[15] to admit it."

"Why, Sister," said Mama. "Here I thought we were going to have a pleasant Fourth of July, and you start right out not believing a word your own baby sister tells you!"

"Just like Cousin Annie Flo. Went to her grave denying the facts of life," I remind Mama.

"I told you if you ever mentioned Annie Flo's name I'd slap your face," says Mama, and slaps my face.

"All right, you wait and see," I says.

"I," says Mama, "*I* prefer to take my children's word for anything when it's humanly possible." You ought to see Mama, she weighs two hundred pounds and has real tiny feet.

Just then something perfectly horrible occurred to me.

"Mama," I says, "can that child talk?" I simply had to whisper! "Mama, I wonder if that child can be—you know—in any way? Do you realize," I says, "that she hasn't spoken one single, solitary word to a human being up to this minute? This is the way she looks," I says, and I looked like this.

Well, Mama and I just stood there and stared at each other. It was horrible!

"I remember well that Joe Whitaker frequently drank like a fish," says Mama. I believed to my soul he drank chemicals." And without another word she marches to the foot of the stairs and calls Stella-Rondo.

"Stella-Rondo? O-o-o-o-o! Stella-Rondo!"

"What?" says Stella-Rondo from upstairs. Not even the grace to get up off the bed.

"Can that child of yours talk?" asks Mama.

Stella-Rondo says, "Can she what?"

"Talk! Talk!" says Mama. "Burdyburdyburdyburdy!"

So Stella-Rondo yells back, "Who says she can't talk?"

"Sister says so," says Mama.

"You didn't have to tell me, I know whose word of honor don't mean a thing in this house," says Stella-Rondo.

And in a minute the loudest Yankee voice I ever heard in my life yells out, "OE'm Pop-OE the Sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!"[16] and then somebody jumps up and down in the up-stairs hall. In another second the house would of fallen down.

"Not only talks, she can tap dance!" calls Stella-Rondo. "Which is more than some people I won't name can do."

"Why, the little precious darling thing!" Mama says, so surprised. "Just as smart as she can be!" Starts talking baby talk[17] right there. Then she turns on me. "Sister, you ought to be thoroughly ashamed! Run upstairs this instant and apologize to Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T."

"Apologize for what?" I says. "I merely wondered if the child was normal, that's all. Now that she's proved she is, why, I have nothing further to say."

But Mama just turned on her heel and flew out, furious. She ran right upstairs and hugged the baby. She believed it was adopted. Stella-Rondo hadn't done a thing but turn her against me from upstairs while I stood there helpless over the hot stove. So that made Mama, Papa-Daddy and the baby all on Stella-Rondo's side.

Next, Uncle Rondo.

I must say that Uncle Rondo has been marvelous to me at various times in the past and I was completely unprepared to be made to jump out of my skin, the way it turned out. Once Stella-Rondo did something perfectly horrible to him—broke a chain letter[18] from Flanders Field—and he took the radio back he had given her and gave it to me. Stella-Rondo was furious! For six months we all had to call her Stella instead of Stella-Rondo, or she wouldn't answer. I always thought Uncle Rondo had all the brains of the entire family. Another time he sent me to Mammoth Cave,[19] with all expenses paid.

But this would be the day he was drinking that prescription, the Fourth of July.

So at supper Stella-Rondo speaks up and says she thinks Uncle Rondo ought to try to eat a little something. So finally Uncle Rondo said he would try a little cold biscuits and ketchup, but that was all. So she brought it to him.

"Do you think it wise to disport[20] with ketchup in Stella-Rondo's flesh-colored kimono?" I says. Trying to be considerate! If Stella-Rondo couldn't watch out for her trousseau, somebody had to.

"Any objections?" asks Uncle Rondo, just about to pour out all the ketchup.

"Don't mind what she says, Uncle Rondo," says Stella-Rondo. "Sister has been devoting this solid afternoon to sneering out my bedroom window at the way you look."

"What's that?" says Uncle Rondo. Uncle Rondo has got the most terrible temper in the world. Anything is liable to make him tear the house down if it comes at the wrong time.

So Stella-Rondo says, "Sister says, 'Uncle Rondo certainly does look like a fool in that pink kimono!'"

Do you remember who it was really said that?

Uncle Rondo spills out all the ketchup and jumps out of his chair and tears off the kimono and throws it down on the dirty floor and puts his foot on it. It had to be sent all the way to Jackson to the cleaners and repeated.

"So that's your opinion of your Uncle Rondo, is it?" he says. "I look like a fool, do I? Well, that's the last straw. A whole day in this house with nothing to do, and then to hear you come out with a remark like that behind my back!"[21]

"I didn't say any such of a thing, Uncle Rondo," I says, "and I'm not saying who did, either. Why, I think you look all right. Just try to take care of yourself and not talk and eat at the same time," I says. "I think you better go lie down."

"Lie down my foot,"[22] says Uncle Rondo. I ought to of known by that he was fixing to do something perfectly horrible.

So he didn't do anything that night in the precarious state he was in—just played Casino with Mama and Stella-Rondo and Shirley-T. and gave Shirley-T. a nickel with a head on both sides. It tickled her nearly to death, and she called him "Papa." But at 6:30 A.M. the next morning, he threw a whole five-cent package of some unsold one-inch firecrackers from the store as hard as he could into my bedroom and they every one went off. Not one bad one in the string. Anybody else, there'd be one that wouldn't go off.

Well, I'm just terribly susceptible to noise of any kind, the doctor has always told me I was the most sensitive person he had ever seen in his whole life, and I was simply prostrated.[23] I couldn't eat! People tell me they heard it as far as the cemetery, and old Aunt Jep Patterson, that had been holding her own so good, thought it was Judgment Day[24] and she was going to meet her whole family.[25] It's usually so quiet here.

And I'll tell you it didn't take me any longer than a minute to make up my mind what to do. There I was with the whole entire house on Stella-Rondo's side and turned against me. If I have anything at all I have pride.

So I just decided I'd go straight down to the P.O. There's plenty of room there in the back, I says to myself.

Well! I make no bones about[26] letting the family catch on to what I was up to. I didn't try to conceal it.

The first thing they knew, I marched in where they were all playing Old Maid and pulled the electric oscillating fan out by the plug, and everything got real hot. Next I snatched the pillow I'd done the needlepoint on right off the davenport from behind Papa-Daddy. He went "Ugh!" I beat Stella-Rondo up the stairs and finally found my charm bracelet in her bureau drawer under a picture of Nelson Eddy.[27]

"So that's the way the land lies," says Uncle Rondo. There he was, piecing on the ham.[28] "Well" Sister, I'll be glad to donate my army cot if you got any place to set it up, providing you'll leave right this minute and let me get some peace." Uncle Rondo was in France.

"Thank you kindly for the cot and 'peace' is hardly the word I would select if I had to resort to firecrackers at 6:30 a.m. in a young girl's bedroom," I says back to him. "And as to where I intend to go, you seem to forget my position as postmistress of China Grove, Mississippi," I says. "I've always got the P.O."

Well, that made them all sit up and take notice.

I went out front and started digging up some four-o'clocks[29] to plant around the P.O.

"Ah-ah-ah!" says Mama, raising the window. "Those happen to be my four-o'clocks. Everything planted in that star is mine. I've never known you to make anything grow in your life."

"Very well," I says "But I take the fern. Even you, Mama, can't stand there and deny that I'm the one watered that fern. And I happen to know where I can send in a box top[30] and get a packet of one thousand mixed seeds, no two the same kind, free."

"Oh where?" Mama wants to know.

But I says, "Too late. You 'tend to your house, and I'll 'tend to mine. You hear things like that all the time if you know how to listen to the radio. Perfectly marvelous offers. Get anything you want free."

So I hope to tell you I marched in and got that radio, and they could of all bit a nail in two, especially Stella-Rondo, that it used to belong to, and she well knew she couldn't get it back, I'd sue for it like a shot. And I very politely took the sewing machine motor I helped pay the most on to give Mama for Christmas back in 1929, and a good big calendar, with the first aid remedies on it. The thermometer and the Hawaiian ukulele certainly were rightfully mine, and I stood on the step-ladder and got all my watermelon-rind preserves and every fruit and vegetable I'd put up,[31] every jar. Then I began to pull the tacks out of the bluebird wall vases on the archway to the dining room.

"Who told you you could have those, Miss Priss?" says Mama, fanning as hard as she could.

"I bought 'em and I'll keep track of 'em," I says. "I'll tack 'em up one on each side the post office window, and you can see 'em when you come to ask me for your mail, if you're so dead to see 'em."

"Not I! I'll never darken the door to that post office again if I live to be a hundred," Mama says. "Ungrateful child! After all the money we spent on you at the Normal."

"Me either," says Stella-Rondo. "You can just let my mail lie there and rot, for all I care. I'll never come and relieve you of a single, solitary piece.

"I should worry," I says. "And who you think's going to sit down and write you all those big fat letters and postcards, by the way? Mr. Whitaker? Just because he was the only man ever dropped down in China Grove and you got him—unfairly—is he going to sit down and write you a lengthy correspondence after you come home giving no rhyme nor reason whatsoever for your separation and no explanation for the presence of that child? I may not have your brilliant mind, but I fail to see it."

So Mama says, "Sister, I've told you a thousand times that Stella-Rondo simply got homesick, and this child is far too big to be hers," and she says, "Now, why don't you all just sit down and play Casino?"

Then Shirley-T. sticks out her tongue at me in this perfectly horrible way. She has no more manners than the man in the moon. I told her she was going to cross her eyes like that some day and they'd stick.

"It's too late to stop me now," I says. "You should have tried that yesterday. I'm going to the P.O. and the only way you can possibly see me is to visit me there."

So Papa-Daddy says, "You'll never catch me setting foot in that post office, even if I should take a notion into my head to write a letter some place." He says, "I won't have you reachin' out of that little old window with a pair of shears and cuttin' off any beard of mine. I'm too smart for you!"

"We all are," says Stella-Rondo.

But I said, "If you're so smart, where's Mr. Whitaker?"

So then Uncle Rondo says, "I'll thank you from now on to stop reading all the orders I get on postcards and telling everybody in China Grove what you think is the matter with them," but I says, "I draw my own conclusions[12] and will continue in the future to draw them." I says, "If people want to write their inmost secrets on penny postcards, there's nothing in the wide world you can do about it, Uncle Rondo."

"And if you think we'll ever *write* another postcard you're sadly mistaken," says Mama.

"Cutting off your nose to spite your face[13] then," I says. "But if you're all determined to have no more to do with the U.S. mail, think of this: What will Stella-Rondo do now, if she wants to tell Mr. Whitaker to come after her?"

"Wah!" says Stella-Rondo. I knew she'd cry. She had a conniption fit[14] right there in the kitchen.

"It will be interesting to see how long she holds out," I says. "And now—I am leaving."

"Good bye," says Uncle Rondo.

"Oh, I declare," says Mama, "to think that a family of mine should quarrel on the Fourth of July, or the day after, over Stella-Rondo leaving old Mr. Whitaker and having the sweetest little adopted child! It looks like we'd all be glad!"

"Wah!" says Stella-Rondo, and has a fresh conniption fit.

"*He* left *her*—you mark my words," I says. "That's Mr. Whitaker. I know Mr. Whitaker. After all, I knew him first. I said from the beginning he'd up and leave her. I foretold every single thing that's happened."

"Where did he go?" asks Mama.

"Probably to the North Pole, if he knows what's good for him," I says.

But Stella-Rondo just bawled[15] and wouldn't say another word. She flew to her room and slammed the door.

"Now look what you've gone and done, Sister," says Mama. "You go apologize."

"I haven't got time, I'm leaving," I says.

"Well, what are you waiting around for?" asks Uncle Rondo.

So I just picked up the kitchen clock and marched on, without saying "Kiss my foot" or anything, and never did tell Stella-Rondo good-bye.

There was a girl going along on a little wagon right in front.

"Girl," I says, "come help me haul these things down the hill, I'm going to live in the post office."

Took her nine trips in her express wagon. Uncle Rondo came out on the porch and threw her a nickel.

And that's the last I've laid eyes on any of my family or my family laid eyes on me for five solid days and nights. Stella-Rondo may be telling the most horrible tales in the world about Mr. Whitaker, but I haven't heard them. As I tell everybody, I draw my own conclusions.

But oh, I like it here. It's ideal, as I've been saying. You see, I've got everything cater-cornered,[16] the way I like it. Hear the radio? All the war news. Radio, sewing machine, book ends, ironing board and that great big piano lamp—peace, that's what I like. Butter-bean vines planted all along the front where the strings are.

Of course, there's not much mail. My family are naturally the main people in China Grove, and if they prefer to vanish from the face of the earth, for all the mail they get or the mail they write, why, I'm not going to open my mouth. Some of the folks here in town are taking up for me and some turned against me. I know which is which. There are always people who will quit buying stamps just to get on the right side of Papa-Daddy.

But here I am, and here I'll stay. I want the world to know I'm happy.

And if Stella-Rondo should come to me this minute, on bended knees, and attempt to explain the incidents of her life with Mr. Whitaker, I'd simply put my fingers in both my ears and refuse to listen.

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *one-sided:* biased
2. *drop dead for a second:* to be so surprised that one might drop dead
3. *spit-image* = spitting image: an exact copy
4. *a cross between Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy:* resembling both Mr. Whitaker and Papa-Daddy
5. *a million years old:* the narrator is using a hyperbole to emphasize how old Papa-Daddy is
6. *Hussy:* a woman of loose morals
7. *if Shirley-T hadn't lost the Milky Way she ate in Cairo:* if Shirley-T had not thrown-up the Milky Way candy bar that she had eaten in Cairo, Illinois
8. *kimonos:* Japanese robes
9. *before you could say "Jack Robinson":* almost immediately
10. *a one-track mind:* someone who can only think about one thing at a time
11. *contraption:* a thing or object (usually used with an electrical or mechanical item, but in this case used to refer to Stella-Rondo's kimono)
12. *trousseau:* the wardrobe that Stella-Rondo received when she got married
13. *Kress tweezers:* a brand of tweezers, a pincher-like device
14. *turned both of the Negroes loose:* gave the household help time-off
15. *stuck-up:* snobbish; conceited
16. *"OE'm Pop-OE the sailor-r-r-r Ma-a-an!":* the song sung by the comic strip character Popeye: "I'm Popeye, the sailor man!..."
17. *baby talk:* simplified language addressed to babies and small children
18. *chain letter:* a letter that is sent to additional people who in turn send it on to more people who send it on to still more people, etc.
19. *Mammoth Cave:* a tourist attraction in Kentucky
20. *disport:* to play around
21. *behind my back:* without my knowledge
22. *my foot:* (exclamation) Ridiculous!
23. *prostrated:* to be laid low; to fall to a lowly position
24. *Judgment Day:* the day the world ends; the day one comes face to face with God who determines whether s/he goes to heaven or to hell
25. *...to meet her whole family:* in death one is reunited with those who died
26. *I made no bones about:* I wasn't bothered about
27. *Nelson Eddy:* a singer/motion-picture star popular in the 1930s and '40s
28. *piecing on the ham:* taking pieces of the ham to nibble on
29. *four-o'clocks:* a type of flower whose blossoms open in the afternoon (about 4 o'clock)
30. *send in a box top:* by sending in a box top from a breakfast cereal or the like, it is possible to receive a free gift from the manufacturer
31. *put up:* to can or preserve fruit or vegetables
32. *draw my own conclusions:* to think for myself
33. *"Cutting off your nose to spite your face":* Proverb meaning that one harms oneself in trying to punish another person
34. *conniption fit:* a fit of anger
35. *bawled:* cried
36. *cater-cornered:* in a diagonal position (also catty-corned or kitty-cornered)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What do you think is the basic cause of Sister's poor relationship with Stella-Rondo?*
2. *How does Stella-Rondo influence the way the other family members feel toward Sister?*
3. *In what ways does Sister make her situation in the family more difficult? How does she worsen her relationship with Papa-Daddy, Uncle Rondo, and Mama?*
4. *With which characters in the story do you feel most sympathetic?*
5. *How would you help the family resolve their differences to bring them all together again?*

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The Worm in the Apple

JOHN CHEEVER

Even when families live quiet, respectable lives, outsiders may speculate about what is really going on. Is it human nature to want to know about the private lives of others? In this story, the Crutchmans seem like the perfect family. What could they be hiding?

The Crutchmans were so very, very happy and so temperate[1] in all their habits and so pleased with everything that came their way that one was bound to suspect a worm in their rosy apple[2] and that the extraordinary rosiness of the fruit was only meant to conceal the gravity and the depth of the infection. Their house, for instance, on Hill Street with all those big glass windows. (127) Who but someone suffering from a guilt complex would want so much light to pour into their rooms? And all the wall-to-wall carpeting as if an inch of bare floor (there was none) would touch on some deep memory of unrequition[3] and loneliness. And there was a certain necrophilic ardor[4] to their gardening. Why be so intense about digging holes and planting seeds and watching them come up? Why this morbid[5] concern with the earth? She was a pretty woman with that striking pallor[6] you so often find in nymphomaniacs.[7] Larry was a big man who used to garden without a shirt, which may have shown a tendency to infantile exhibitionism.

They moved happily out to Shady Hill after the war.[8] Larry had served in the Navy. They had two happy children: Rachel and Tom. But there were already some clouds on their horizon.[9] Larry's ship had been sunk in the war and he had spent four days on a raft in the Mediterranean and surely this experience would make him skeptical about the comforts and songbirds of Shady Hill and leave him with some racking nightmares. But what was perhaps more serious was the fact the Helen was rich. She was the only daughter of old Charlie Simpson—one of the last of the industrial buccaneers—who had left her with a larger income than Larry would ever take away from his job at Melcher & Thaw. The dangers in this situation are well known. Since Larry did not have to make a living—since he lacked any incentive—he might take it easy, spend too much time on the golf links, and always have a glass in his hand. Helen would confuse financial with emotional independence and damage the delicate balances within their marriage. But Larry seemed to have no nightmares and Helen spread her income among the charities and lived a comfortable but a modest life. Larry went to his job each morning with such enthusiasm that you might think he was trying to escape from something. His participation in the life of the community was so vigorous that he must have been left with almost no time for self-examination. He was everywhere: he was at the communion rail,[10] the fifty-yard line,[11] he played the oboe with the Chamber Music Club, drove the fire truck,[12] served on the school board, and rode the 8:03 into New York[13] every morning. What was the sorrow that drove him?

He may have wanted a larger family. Why did they only have two children? Why not three or four? Was there perhaps some breakdown in their relationship after the birth of Tom? Rachel, the oldest, was terribly fat when she was a girl and quite aggressive in a mercenary way. Every spring she would drag an old dressing table out of the garage and set it up on the sidewalk with a sign saying: FReSH LEMonADE. 15 cents. Tom had pneumonia when he was six and nearly died, but he recovered and there were no complications. The children may have felt rebellious about the conformity of their parents, for they were exacting conformists.[14] Two cars? Yes. Did they go to church? Every single Sunday they got to their knees and prayed with ardor. Clothing? They couldn't have been more punctilious[15] in their observance of the sumptuary[16] laws. Book clubs, local art and music lover associations, athletics and cards—they were up to their necks[17] in everything. But if the children were rebellious they concealed their rebellion and seemed happily to love their parents and happily to be loved in return, but perhaps there was in this love the ruefulness of some deep disappointment. Perhaps he was impotent. Perhaps she was frigid[18]—but hardly, with that pallor. Everyone in the community with wandering hands had given them both a try[19] but they had all been put off.[20] What was the source of this constancy? Were they frightened? Were they prudish? Were they monogamous?[21] What was at the bottom of this appearance of happiness?

As their children grew one might look to them for the worm in the apple. They would be rich, they would inherit Helen's fortune, and we might see here, moving over them, the shadow that so often falls upon children who can count on a lifetime of financial security. And any-how Helen loved her son too much. She bought him everything he wanted. Driving him to dancing school in his first blue serge[22] suit she was so entranced by the manly figure he cut as he climbed the stairs that she drove the car straight into an elm tree. Such an infatuation was bound to lead to trouble. And if she favored her son she was bound to discriminate against her daughter. Listen to her. "Rachel's feet," she says, "are immense, simply immense. I can never get shoes for her." Now perhaps we see the worm. Like most beautiful women she is jealous; she is jealous of her own daughter! She cannot brook[23] competition. She will dress the girl in hideous clothing, have her hair curled in some unbecoming way, and keep talking about the size of her feet until the poor girl will refuse to go to the dances or if she is forced to go she will sulk in the ladies' room, staring at her monstrous feet. She will become so wretched and so lonely that in order to express herself she will fall in love with an unstable poet and fly with him to Rome, where they will live out a miserable and a boozy exile. But when the girl enters the room she is pretty and prettily dressed and she smiles at her mother with perfect love. Her feet are quite large, to be sure, but so is her front. Perhaps we should look to the son to find our trouble.

And there is trouble. He fails his junior year in high school and has to repeat and as a result of having to repeat he feels alienated from the members of his class and is put, by chance, at a desk next to Carrie Witchell, who is the most conspicuous dish[24] in Shady Hill. Everyone knows about the Witchells and their pretty, high-spirited daughter. They drink too much and live in one of those frame houses in Maple Dell. The girl is really beautiful and everyone knows how her shrewd old parents are planning to climb out of Maple Dell on the strength of her white, white skin. What a perfect situation! They will know about Helen's wealth. In the darkness of their bedroom they will calculate the settlement they can demand and in the malodorous[25] kitchen where they take all their meals they will tell their pretty daughter to let the boy go as far as he wants. But Tom fell out of love with Carrie as swiftly as he fell into it and after that he fell in love with Karen Strawbridge and Susie Morris and Anna Macken and you might think he was unstable, but in his second year in college he announced his engagement to Elizabeth Trustman and they were married after his graduation and since he then had to serve his time in the Army she followed him to his post in Germany, where they studied and learned the language and befriended the people and were a credit to their country.

Rachel's way was not so easy. When she lost her fat she became very pretty and quite fast.[26] She smoked and drank and probably fornicated[27] and the abyss that opens up before a pretty and an intemperate young woman is unfathomable.[28] What, by chance, was there to keep her from ending up as a hostess at a Times Square dance hall? And what would her poor father think, seeing the face of his daughter, her breasts lightly covered with gauze, gazing mutely at him on a rainy morning from one of those showcases? What she did was to fall in love with the son of the Farquarsons' German gardener. He had come with his family to the United States on the Displaced Persons quota after the war. His name was Eric Reiner and to be fair about it he was an exceptional young man who looked on the United States as a truly New World. The Crutchmans must have been sad about Rachel's choice—not to say heartbroken—but they concealed their feelings. The Reiners did not. This hard-working German couple thought the marriage hopeless and improper. At one point the father beat his son over the head with a stick of firewood. But the young couple continued to see each other and presently they eloped. They had to. Rachel was three months pregnant. Eric was then a freshman at Tufts, where he had a scholarship. Helen's money came in handy here and she was able to rent an apartment in Boston for the young couple and pay their expenses. That their first grandchild was premature did not seem to bother the Crutchmans. When Eric graduated from college he got a fellowship at M.I.T. and took his Ph.D in physics and was taken on as an associate in the department. He could have gone into industry at a higher salary but he liked to teach and Rachel was happy in Cambridge, where they remained.

With their own dear children gone away the Crutchmans might be expected to suffer the celebrated spiritual destitution of their age and their kind—the worm in the apple would at last be laid bare—although watching this charming couple as they entertained their friends or read the books they enjoyed one might wonder if the worm was not in the eye of the observer who, through timidity or moral cowardice, could not embrace the broad range of their natural enthusiasms and would not grant that, while Larry played neither Bach nor football very well, his pleasure in both was genuine. You might at least expect to see in them the usual destructiveness of time, but either through luck or as a result of their temperate and healthy lives they had lost neither their teeth nor their hair. The touchstone[29] of their euphoria[30] remained potent, and while Larry gave up the fire truck he could still be seen at the communion rail, the fifty-yard line, the 8:03, and the Chamber Music Club, and through the prudence and shrewdness of Helen's broker they got richer and richer and richer and lived happily, happily, happily, happily. ❧

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *temperate:* moderate, balanced
2. *a worm in their rosy apple:* a variant of the cliche citing the presence of an alien creature that harms or destroys the environment in which it lives
3. *unrequition:* unfulfilled love
4. *necrophilic ardor:* an erotic interest in the dead
5. *morbid:* gloomy, mentally unhealthy interest in the dead
6. *pallor:* unnatural paleness
7. *nymphomaniacs:* women with an uncontrollable sexual desire
8. *the war:* World War II
9. *clouds in the horizon:* an unpromising future
10. *communion rail:* the location in the Catholic church where believers receive the Holy Eucharist
11. *fifty-yard line:* the mid-point of a football field
12. *drove the fire truck:* Many small communities in the United States have volunteer fire departments, and the town's citizens take on specific roles when a fire breaks out
13. *the 8:03 into New York:* the commuter train to New York city leaving at 8:03 in the morning
14. *exacting conformists:* wishing not to be different in any way from other people
15. *punctilious:* strictly respectful of all formalities and established ways of doing things
16. *sumptuary:* dealing with expenses
17. *up to their necks:* very much involved
18. *impotent... frigid:* sexually dysfunctional behavior relating to men and women respectively
19. *Everyone in the community with wandering hands had given both a try:* People who were interested in an adulterous relationship with Mr. or Mrs. Crutchman had tried but failed
20. *put off:* discourage, reject
21. *monogamous:* having only one mate
22. *serge:* a special weave of fabric
23. *brook:* tolerate, allow
24. *conspicuous dish:* (slang) a good-looking woman
25. *malodorous:* having an unpleasant smell
26. *fast:* sexually promiscuous
27. *fornicated:* to have sexual intercourse with someone
28. *unfathomable abyss:* an unmeasurable hole or depression
29. *touchstone:* a test or criterion for quality
30. *euphoria:* joy, happiness

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What do we know about the Crutchmans that is based completely on factual information?*
2. *What is some of the gossip that has been reported about them?*
3. *Have you known anyone like the Crutchmans or their children? Explain.*
4. *Does the narrator's attitude toward the Crutchmans change as the story progresses?*
5. *What parts of the story seem to be complete fantasy?*

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couples

It seemed to me that I would have
a hard time forgiving him for this.
I had the feeling of some kind of ending—
not of our marriage or anything as
easy as that. I didn't know what.

Marshall N. Klimasewiski

Immigration Blues

BIENVENIDO N. SANTOS

Alipio Palma is a Filipino American. Immigrating from the Philippines before World War II, he has recently lost his wife and is now recuperating from a serious car accident. The future does not look bright. But what does he see outside his apartment? Perhaps a new chapter in his life is about to begin.

Through the window curtain, Alipio saw two women, one seemed twice as large as the other. In their summer dresses, they looked like the country girls he knew back home in the Philippines, who went around peddling rice cakes. The slim one could have passed for his late wife Seniang's sister whom he remembered only in pictures because she never made it to the United States. Before Seniang's death, the couple had arranged for her coming to San Francisco, filing all the required petition papers to facilitate the approval of her visa. The sister was always "almost ready, all the papers have been signed," but she never showed up. His wife had been ailing and when she died, he thought that hearing of her death would hasten her coming, but the wire he had sent her was neither returned nor acknowledged.

The knocking on the door was gentle. A little hard of hearing, Alipio was not sure it was indeed a knocking on the door, but it sounded different from the little noises that sometimes hummed in his ears in the daytime. It was not yet noon, but it must be warm outside in all that sunshine, otherwise those two women would be wearing spring dresses at the least. There were summer days in San Francisco that were cold like winter in the Midwest.

He limped painfully to the door. Until last month, he wore crutches. The entire year before that, he was bedridden, but he had to force himself to walk about in the house after coming from the hospital. After Seniang's death, everything had gone to pieces. It was one bust after another, he complained to the few friends who came to visit him.

"Seniang was my good luck. When God decided to take her, I had nothing but bad luck," he said.

Not long after Seniang's death, he was in a car accident. For almost a year he was in the hospital. The doctors were not sure he was going to walk again. He told them it was God's wish. As it was he was thankful he was still alive. It had been a horrible accident.

The case dragged on in court. His lawyer didn't seem too good about car accidents. He was an expert immigration lawyer, but he was a friend. As it turned out, Alipio lost the full privileges and benefits coming to him in another two years if he had not been hospitalized and had continued working until his official retirement.

However, he was well provided. He didn't spend a cent for doctor and medicine and hospital bills. Now there was the prospect of a few thousand dollars compensation. After deducting his lawyer's fees it would still be something to live on. He had social security benefits and a partial retirement pension. Not too bad, really. Besides, now he could walk a little although he still limped and had to move about with extreme care.

When he opened the door, the fat woman said, "Mr Palma? Alipio Palma?" Her intonation sounded like the beginning of a familiar song.

"Yes," he said. "Come in, come on in." He had not talked to anyone the whole week. His telephone had not rung all that time, not even a wrong number, and there was nobody he wanted to talk to. The little noises in his ears had somehow kept him company. Radio and television sounds lulled him to sleep.

The thin one was completely out of sight as she stood behind the big one who was doing the talking. "I'm sorry, I should have phoned you first, but we were in a hurry."

"The house is a mess," Alipio said truthfully. Had he been imagining things? He remembered seeing two women on the porch. There was another one, who looked like Seniang's sister. The woman said "we," and just then the other one materialized, close behind the big one, who walked in with the assurance of a social worker, about to do him a favor.

"Sit down. Sit down. Anywhere," Alipio said as he led the two women through the dining room, past a huge rectangular table in the center. It was bare except for a vase of plastic flowers as centerpiece. He passed his hand over his face, a mannerism which Seniang hated. Like you have a hangover, she chided him, and you can't see straight.

A TV set stood close to a wall in the small living room crowded with an assortment of chairs and tables. An aquarium crowded the mantelpiece of a fake fireplace. A lighted bulb inside the tank showed many colored fish swimming about in a haze of fish food. Some of it lay scattered on the edge of the shelf. The carpet underneath was sodden black. Old magazines and tabloids lay just about everywhere.

"Sorry to bother you like this," the fat one said as she plunked herself down on the nearest chair, which sagged to the floor under her weight. The thin one chose the end of the sofa away from the TV set.

"I was just preparing my lunch. I know it's quite early, but I had nothing to do," Alipio said, pushing down with both hands the seat of the cushioned chair near a moveable partition, which separated the living room from the dining room. "It's painful just trying to sit down. I'm not too well yet," he added as he finally made it.

"I hope we're not really bothering you," the fat one said. The other had not said a word. She looked pale and sick. Maybe she was hungry or cold.

"How's it outside?" Alipio asked. "I've not been out all day." Whenever he felt like it, he dragged a chair to the porch and sat there, watching the construction going on across the street and smiling at the people passing by who happened to look his way. Some smiled back and mumbled something like a greeting or a comment on the beauty of the day. He stayed on until he got bored or it became colder than he could stand.

"It's fine. It's fine outside. Just like Baguio,"[1] the fat one said.

"You know Baguio? I was born near there."

"We're sisters."

Alipio was thinking, won't the other one speak at all?

"I'm Mrs. Antonieta Zafra, the wife of Carlito. I believe you know him. He says you're friends. In Salinas[2] back in the thirties. He used to be a cook at the Marina."

"Carlito, yes, yes, Carlito Zafra. We bummed together. We come from Ilocos.[3] Where you from?"

"Aklan.[4] My sister and I speak Cebuano."[5]

"Oh, she speak? You, you don't speak Ilocano?"[6]

"Not much. Carlito and I talk in English. Except when he's real mad, like when his cock don't fight or when he lose, then he speaks Ilocano. Cuss words. I've learned them myself. Some, anyway."

"Yes. Carlito. He love cockfighting. How's he?"

"Retired like you. We're now in Fresno. On a farm. He raises chickens and hogs. I do some sewing in town when I can. My sister here is Monica. She is older than me. Never been married."

Monica smiled at the old man, her face in anguish, as if near tears.

"Carlito. He got some fighting cocks, I bet."

"Not anymore. But he talks a lot about cockfighting. But nobody, not even the pinoys[7] and the Chicanos[8] are "interested in it." Mrs. Zafra appeared pleased at the state of things on her home front.

"I remember. Carlito once promoted a cockfight. Everything was ready, but the roosters won't fight. Poor man, he did everything to make them fight like having them peck on each other's necks and so forth. They were so tame, so friendly with each other. Only thing they didn't do is embrace." Alipio laughed, showing a set of perfectly white and even teeth, obviously dentures.

"He hasn't told me about that, I'll remind him."

"Do that. Where's he? Why isn't he with you?"

"We didn't know we'd find you. While visiting some friends this morning, we learned you live here." Mrs. Zafra was beaming on him.

"I've always lived here, but I got few friends now. So you're Mrs. Carlito. I thought he's dead already. I never hear from him. We're old now. We're old already when we got our citizenship papers right after Japanese surrender. So you and him. Good for Carlito."

"I heard about your accident."

"After Seniang died. She was not yet sixty, but she had this heart trouble. I took care of her." Alipio seemed to have forgotten his visitors. He sat there staring at the fish in the aquarium, his ears perked as though waiting for some sound, like the breaking of the surf not far away, or the TV set suddenly turned on.

The sisters looked at each other. Monica was fidgeting, her eyes seemed to say, let's go, let's get out of here.

"Did you hear that?" the old man said.

Monica turned to her sister, her eyes wild with panic. Mrs. Zafra leaned forward, her hand touching the edge of the chair where Alipio sat, and asked gently, "Hear what?"

"The waves. Listen. They're just outside, you know. The breakers have a nice sound like at home in the Philippines. We lived in a coastal town. Like here, I always tell Seniang, across that ocean is the Philippines, we're not far from home."

"But you're alone now. It's not good to be alone," Mrs. Zafra said.

"At night I hear better. I can see the Pacific Ocean from my bedroom It sends me to sleep. I sleep soundly like I got no debts. I can sleep all day, too, but that's bad. So I walk. I walk much before. I go out there. I let the breakers touch me. It's nice the touch. Seniang always scold me, she says I'll be catching cold, but I don't catch cold, she catch the cold all the time."

"You must miss her," Mrs. Zafra said. Monica was staring at her hands on her lap while the sister talked. Monica's skin was transparent and the veins showed on the back of her hands like trapped eels.

"I take care of Seniang. I work all day and leave her here alone. When I come home, she's smiling. She's wearing my jacket and my slippers. You look funny, I says, why do you wear my things, you're lost inside them. She chuckles, you keep me warm all day, she says, like you're here, I smell you. Oh that Seniang. You see, we have no baby. If we have a baby…

"I think you and Carlito have the same fate. We have no baby also."

"God dictates," Alipio said, making an effort to stand. In a miraculous surge of power, Monica rushed to him and helped him up. She seemed astonished and embarrassed at what she had done.

"Thank you," said Alipio. "I have crutches, but I don't want no crutches. They tickle me, they hurt me, too." He watched Monica go back to her seat.

"You need help better than crutches," Mrs. Zafra said.

"God helps," Alipio said, walking towards the kitchen as if expecting to find the Almighty there.

Mrs. Zafra followed him. "What are you preparing?" she asked.

"Let's have lunch," he said, "I'm hungry. I hope you are also."

"We'll help you," Mrs Zafra said, turning back to where Monica sat staring at her hands again and listening perhaps for the sound of the sea. She had not noticed nor heard her sister when she called, "Monica!"

The second time she heard her. Monica stood up and went to the kitchen.

"There's nothing to prepare," Alipio was saying, as he opened the refrigerator. "What you want to eat? Me, I don't eat bread so I got no bread. I eat rice. I was just opening a can of sardines when you come. I like sardines with lotsa tomato juice, it's great with hot rice."

"Don't you cook the sardines?" Mrs. Zafra asked. "Monica will cook it for you if you want."

"No! If you cook sardines, it taste bad. Better uncooked. Besides it gets cooked on top of the hot rice. Mix with onions, chopped nice. Raw not cooked. You like it?"

"Monica loves raw onions, don't you, Sis?"

"Yes," Monica said in a low voice.

"Your sister, she is well?" Alipio said, glancing towards Monica.

Mrs. Zafra gave her sister an angry look.

"I'm okay," Monica said, a bit louder this time.

"She's not sick," Mrs. Zafra said, "But she's shy. Her own shadow frightens her. I tell you this sister of mine, she got problems."

"Oh?" Alipio exclaimed. He had been listening quite attentively.

"I eat onions, raw," Monica said. "Sardines, too, I like uncooked."

Her sister smiled. "What do you say, I run out for some groceries," she said, going back to the living room to get her bag.

"Thanks. But no need for you to do that. I got lotsa food, canned food. Only thing I haven't got is bread," Alipio said.

"I eat rice, too," Monica said.

Alipio reached up to open the cabinet. It was stacked full of canned food: corn beef, pork and beans, vienna sausage, tuna, crab meat, shrimp, chow mein, imitation noodles, and, of course, sardines, in green and yellow labels.

"The yellow ones with mustard sauce, not tomato," he explained.

"All I need is a cup of coffee," Mrs. Zafra said, throwing her handbag back on the chair in the living room.

Alipio opened two drawers near the refrigerator. "Look," he said as Mrs. Zafra came running back to the kitchen. "I got more food to last me…a long time."

The sisters gaped at the bags of rice, macaroni, spaghetti sticks, sugar, dried shrimps wrapped in cellophane, bottles of soy sauce and fish sauce, vinegar, ketch-up, instant coffee, and more cans of sardines.

The sight of all that foodstuff seemed to have enlivened the old man. After all, food meant life, continuing sustenance, source of energy and health. "Now look here," he said, turning briskly now to the refrigerator, which he opened, the sudden light touching his face with a glow that erased years from his eyes. With a jerk he pulled open the large freezer, cramped full of meats. "Mostly lamb chops," he said, adding, "I like lamb chops."

"Carlito, he hates lamb chops," Mrs. Zafra said.

"I like lamb chops," Monica said, still wild eyed, but now a bit of color tinted her cheeks. "Why do you have so much food?" she asked.

Alipio looked at her before answering. He thought she looked younger than Mrs. Zafra. "You see," he said, closing the refrigerator. He was beginning to chill. "I watch the papers for bargain sales. I can still drive the car when I feel right. It's only now my legs bothering me. So. I buy all I can. Save me many trips. Money, too."

Later they sat around the enormous table in the dining room. Monica shared half a plate of boiling rice topped with a sardine with Alipio. He showed her how to place the sardine on top, pressing it a little and pouring spoonfuls of tomato juice over it.

Mrs. Zafra had coffee and settled for a small can of Vienna sausage and a little rice. She sipped her coffee meditatively.

"This is good coffee," she said. "I remember how we used to hoard Hills Bros. coffee at…at the convent. The sisters were quite selfish about it."

"Antonieta was a nun, a sister of mercy," Monica said.

"What?" Alipio exclaimed, pointing a finger at her for no apparent reason, an involuntary gesture of surprise.

"Yes, I was," Mrs. Zafra admitted. "When I married, I had been out of the order for more than a year, yes, in California, at St. Mary's."

"You didn't…" Alipio began.

"Of course not," she interrupted him. "If you mean did I leave the order to marry Carlito. Oh, no. He was already an old man when I met him."

"I see. We used to joke him because he didn't like the girls too much. He prefer the cocks." The memory delighted him so much, he reared his head up as he laughed, covering his mouth hastily, but too late. Some of the tomato soaked grains had already spilled out on his plate and on the table in front of him.

Monica looked pleased as she gathered carefully some of the grains on the table.

"He hasn't changed," Mrs. Zafra said vaguely. "It was me who wanted to marry him."

"You? After being a nun, you wanted to marry… Carlito? But why Carlito?" Alipio seemed to have forgotten for the moment that he was still eating. The steam from the rice touched his face till it glistened darkly. He was staring at Mrs. Zafra as he breathed in the aroma without savoring it.

"It's a long story," Mrs. Zafra said. She stabbed a chunky sausage and brought it to her mouth. She looked pensive as she chewed on it.

"When did this happen?"

"Five, six years ago. Six years ago, almost."

"That long?"

"She had to marry him," Monica said blandly.

"What?" Alipio shouted, visibly disturbed. There was the sound of dentures grating in his mouth. He passed a hand over his face. "Carlito done that to you?"

The coffee spilled a little as Mrs. Zafra put the cup down. "Why no," she said. "What are you thinking of?"

Before he could answer, Monica spoke in the same tone of voice, low, unexcited, saying, "He thinks Carlito got you pregnant, that's what."

"Carlito?" She turned to Monica in disbelief. "Why, Alipio knows Carlito," she said.

Monica shrugged her shoulders. "Why don't you tell him why?" she suggested.

"As I said, it's a long story, but I shall make it short," Mrs. Zafra began. She took a sip from her cup and continued, "After leaving the order, I couldn't find a job. I was interested in social work, but I didn't know anybody who could help me."

As she paused, Alipio said, "What the heck does Carlito know about social work?"

"Let me continue," Mrs. Zafra said.

She still had a little money, from home, and she was not too worried about being jobless. But there was the question of her status as an alien. Once out of the community, she was no longer entitled to stay in the United States, let alone secure employment. The immigration office began to hound her, as it did other Filipinos in similar predicaments. They were a pitiful lot. Some hid in the apartments of friends like criminals running away from the law. Of course, they were law breakers. Those with transportation money returned home, which they hated to do. At home they would be forced to invent stories, tell lies to explain away why they returned so soon. All their lives they had to learn how to cope with the stigma of failure in a foreign land. They were losers and no longer fit for anything useful. The more sensitive and weak lost their minds and had to be committed to insane asylums. Others became neurotic, anti-social, depressed in mind and spirit. Some turned to crime. Or just folded up, in a manner of speaking. It was a nightmare. Antonieta didn't want to go back to the Philippines under those circumstances. She would have had to be very convincing to prove that she was not thrown out of the order for immoral reasons. Just when she seemed to have reached the breaking point, she recalled incidents in which women in her situation married American citizens and, automatically, became entitled to permanent residency with an option to become U.S. citizens after five years. At first, she thought the idea of such a marriage was hideous, unspeakable. Perhaps other foreign women in similar situations could do it—and have done it—but not Philippine girls. But what was so special about Philippine girls? Nothing really, but their upbringing was such that to place themselves in a situation where they had to tell a man that all they wanted was a marriage for convenience was degrading, an unbearable shame. A form of self-destruction. Mortal sin. Better repatriation. A thousand times better.

When an immigration officer finally caught up with her, he proved to be very understanding and quite a gentleman. Yet he was firm. He was young, maybe of Italian descent, and looked like a salesman for a well-known company in the islands that dealt in farm equipment.

"I'm giving you one week," he said. "You have already overstayed by several months. If in one week's time, you haven't left yet, you might have to wait in jail for deportation proceedings."

She cried, oh, how she cried. She wished she had not left the order, no, not really. She had no regrets about leaving up to this point. Life in the convent had turned sour on her. She despised the sisters and the system, which she found tyrannical, inhuman. In her own way, she had a long series of talks with God and God had approved of the step she had taken. She was not going back to the order. Anyhow, even if she did, she would not be taken back. To jail then?

But why not marry an American citizen? In one week's time? How? Accost the first likely man and say, "You look like an American citizen. If you are, indeed, and you have the necessary papers to prove it, will you marry me? I want to remain in this country."

All week she talked to God. It was the same God she had worshipped and feared all her life. Now they were *palsy walsy*[10] on the best of terms. As she brooded over her misfortune, He brooded with her, sympathized with her, and finally advised her to go look for an elderly Filipino who was an American citizen, and tell him the truth of the matter. Tell him that if he wished, it could be a marriage in name only. For his trouble, she would be willing to pay. How much? If it's a bit too much, could she pay on the installment plan? If he wished…otherwise… Meanwhile He would look the other way.

How she found Carlito Zafra was another story, a much longer story, more confused and confusing. It was like a miracle, though. Her friend God could not have sent her to a better instrument to satisfy her need. That was not expressed well, but it amounted to that, a need. Carlito was an instrument necessary for her good. And, as it turned out, a not too unwilling instrument.

"We were married the day before the week was over," Mrs. Zafra said. "And I've been in this country ever since. And no regrets."

They lived well and simply, a country life. True, they were childless, but both of them were helping relatives in the Philippines, sending them money and goods marked Made in U.S.A.

"Lately, however, some of the goods we've been sending do not arrive intact. Do you know that some of the good quality material we send never reach our relatives? It's frustrating."

"We got lotsa thieves between here and there," Alipio said, but his mind seemed to be on something else.

"And I was able to send for Monica. From the snapshots she sent us she seemed to be getting thinner and more sickly, teaching in the barrio.[11] And she wanted so much to come here."

"Seniang was like you also, hiding from immigration. I thank God for her," Alipio told Mrs. Zafra in such a low voice he could hardly be heard.

The sisters pretended they didn't know, but they knew practically everything about him. Alipio appeared tired, pensive and eager to talk so they listened.

"She went to my apartment and said, without any hesitation, marry me and I'll take care of you. She was thin then and I thought what she said was funny, the others had been matching us, you know, but I was not really interested. I believe marriage mean children. And if you cannot produce children, why get married? Besides, I had ugly experiences, bad moments. When I first arrived in the States, here in Frisco,[12] I was young and there were lotsa blondies hanging around on Kearny Street. It was easy. But I wanted a family and they didn't. None of 'em. So what the heck, I said."

Alipio realized that Seniang was not joking. She had to get married to an American citizen, otherwise she would be deported. At that time, Alipio was beginning to feel the disadvantages of living alone. There was too much time in his hands. How he hated himself for some of the things he did. He believed that if he was married, he would be more sensible with his time and his money. He would be happier and live long. So when Seniang showed that she was serious, he agreed to marry her. It was not to be in name only. He wanted a woman. He liked her so much he would have proposed himself had he suspected that he had a chance. She was hardworking, decent, and in those days, rather slim.

"Like Monica," he said.

"Oh, I'm thin," Monica protested, blushing deeply, "I'm all bones."

"Monica is my only sister. We have no brother," Mrs. Zafra said, adding more items to her sister's vita.[13]

"Look," Monica said, "I finished everything on my plate. I've never tasted sardines this good. Especially the way you eat them. I'm afraid I've eaten up your lunch. This is my first full meal. And I thought I've lost my appetite already."

The words came out in a rush. It seemed she didn't want to stop and she paused only because she didn't know what else to say. She moved about, gaily and at ease, perfectly at home. Alipio watched her with a bemused look in his face as she gathered the dishes and brought them to the kitchen sink. When Alipio heard the water running, he stood up, without much effort this time, and walked to her saying, "Don't bother. I got all the time to do that. You got to leave me something to do. Come, perhaps your sister wants another cup of coffee."

Mrs. Zafra had not moved from her seat. She was watching the two argue about the dishes. When she heard Alipio mention coffee, she said, "No, no more, thanks. I've drunk enough to keep me awake all week."

"Well, I'm going to wash them myself later," Monica was saying as she walked back to the table, Alipio close behind her.

"You're an excellent host, Alipio." Mrs. Zafra spoke in a tone like a reading from a citation on a certificate of merit or something. "And to two complete strangers at that. You're a good man."

"But you're not strangers. Carlito is my friend. We were young together in this country. And that's something, you know. There are lotsa[14] guys like us here. Old-timers, o.t.'s, they call us. Permanent residents. U.S. Citizens. We all gonna be buried here." He appeared to be thinking deeply as he added, "But what's wrong about that?"

The sisters ignored the question. The old man was talking to himself.

"What's wrong is to be dishonest. Earn a living with both hands, not afraid of any kind of work, that's the best good. No other way. Yes, everything for convenience, why not? That's frankly honest. No pretend. Love comes in the afterwards. When it comes. If it comes."

Mrs. Zafra chuckled, saying, "Ah, you're a romantic, Alipio. I must ask Carlito about you. You seem to know so much about him. I bet you were quite a…" she paused because what she wanted to say was "rooster," but she might give the impression of over-familiarity.

Alipio interrupted her, saying, "Ask him, he will say yes, I'm a romantic." His voice held a vibrance that was a surprise and a revelation to the visitors. He gestured as he talked, puckering his mouth every now and then, obviously to keep his dentures from slipping out. "What do you think? We were young, why not? We wowed 'em with our gallantry, with our cooking. Boy those dames[15] never seen anything like us. Also, we were fools, most of us, anyway. Fools on fire."

Mrs. Zafra clapped her hands. Monica was smiling.

"Ah, but that fire's gone. Only the fool's left now," Alipio said, weakly. His voice was low and he looked tired as he passed both hands across his face. Then he raised his head. The listening look came back to his face. When he spoke, his voice shook a little.

"Many times I wonder where are the others. Where are you? Speak to me. And I think they're wondering the same, asking the same, so I say, I'm here, your friend Alipio Palma, my leg is broken, the wife she's dead, but I'm okay. Are you okay also? The dead they can hear even if they don't answer. The alive don't answer. But I know. I feel. Some okay, some not. They old now, all of us, who were very young. All over the United States of America. All over the world…"

Abruptly, he turned to Mrs. Zafra, saying, "So. You and Carlito. But Carlito, he never had fire."

"How true, how very very true," Mrs. Zafra laughed. "It would burn him. Can't stand it. Not Carlito. But he's a good man, I can tell you that."

"No question. Dabest,"[16] Alipio conceded.

Monica remained silent, but her eyes followed every move Alipio made, straying no further than the reach of his arms as he gestured to help make clear the intensity of his feeling.

"I'm sure you still got some of that fire," Mrs. Zafra said.

Monica gasped, but she recovered quickly. Again a rush of words came from her lips as if they had been there all the time waiting for what her sister had said that touched off the torrent of words. Her eyes shone as in a fever as she talked.

"I don't know Carlito very well. I've not been with them very long, but from what you say, from the way you talk, from what I see, the two of you are very different."

"Oh, maybe not," Alipio said, trying to protest, but Monica went on.

"You have strength, Mr. Palma. Strength of character. Strength in your belief in God. I admire that in a man, in a human being. Look at you. Alone. This huge table. Don't you find it too big sometimes?" Monica paused perhaps to allow her meaning to sink into Alipio's consciousness, as she fixed her eyes on him.

"No, not really. I don't eat at this table. I eat in the kitchen," Alipio said.

Mrs. Zafra was going to say something, but she held back. Monica was talking again.

"But it must be hard, that you cannot deny. Living from day to day. Alone. On what? Memories? Cabinets and a refrigerator full of food? I repeat, I admire you, sir. You've found your place. You're home safe. And at peace." She paused again this time to sweep back the strand of hair that had fallen on her brow.

Alipio had a drugged look. He seemed to have lost the drift of her speech.[17] What was she talking about? Groceries? Baseball?[18] He was going to say, you like baseball also? You like tuna? I have all kinds of fish. Get them at bargain price. But, obviously, it was not the proper thing to say.

"Well, I guess, one gets used to anything. Even loneliness," Monica said in a listless, dispirited tone, all the fever in her voice gone.

"God dictates," Alipio said, feeling he had found his way again and he was now on the right track. What a girl. If she had only a little more flesh. And color.

Monica leaned back on her chair, exhausted. Mrs. Zafra was staring at her in disbelief, in grievous disappointment. Her eyes seemed to say what happened, you were going great, what suddenly hit you that you had to stop, give up, defeated? Monica shook her head in a gesture that quite clearly said, no, I can't do it, I can't anymore, I give up.

Their eyes kept up a show, a deaf-mute dialogue. Mrs. Zafra: Just when everything was going on fine, you quit. We've reached this far and you quit. I could have done it my way, directly, honestly. Not that what you were doing was dishonest, you were great, and now look at that dumb expression in your eyes. Monica: I can't. I can't anymore. But I tried. It's too much.

"How long have you been in the States?" Alipio asked Monica.

"For almost a year now!" Mrs. Zafra screamed and Alipio was visibly shaken, but she didn't care. This was the right moment. She would take it from here whether Monica went along with her or not. She was going to do it her way. "How long exactly, let's see. Moni, when did you get your last extension?"[19]

"Extension?" Alipio repeated the word. It had such a familiar ring like "visa" or "social security," it broke into his consciousness like a touch from Seniang's fingers. It was quite intimate. "You mean..."

"That's right. She's here as a temporary visitor. As a matter of fact, she came on a tourist visa. Carlito and I sponsored her coming, filed all the necessary papers, and everything would have been fine, but she couldn't wait. She had to come here as a tourist. Now she's in trouble."

"What trouble?" Alipio asked.

"She has to go back to the Philippines. She can't stay here any longer."

"I have only two days left," Monica said, her head in her hands. "And I don't want to go back."

Alipio glanced at the wall clock. It was past three. They had been talking for hours. It was visas right from the start. Marriages. The long years and the o.t.'s. Now it was visas again. Were his ears playing a game? They might as well as they did sometimes, but his eyes surely were not. He could see this woman very plainly, sobbing on the table. Boy, she was in big trouble. Visas. Immigration. Boy, oh, boy! He knew all about that. His gleaming dentures showed a crooked smile. He turned to Mrs. Zafra.

"Did you come here," he began, but Mrs. Zafra interrupted him.

"Yes, Alipio. Forgive us. As soon as we arrived, I wanted to tell you without much talk, I wanted to say, 'I must tell you why we're here. I've heard about you. Not only from Carlito, but from other Filipinos who know you, how you're living here in San Francisco alone, a widower, and we heard of the accident, your stay in the hospital, when you were released, everything. Here's my sister, a teacher in the Philippines, never married, worried to death because she's being deported unless something turned up like she could marry a U.S. citizen, like I did, like your late wife Seniang, like many others have done, are doing in this exact moment, who can say? Now she'd accept it.' But I didn't have a chance to say it. You welcomed us like old friends, relatives. Later every time I began to say something about why we came, she interrupted me. I was afraid she had changed her mind and then she began to talk, then stopped without finishing what she really wanted to say, that is, why we came to see you, and so forth."

"No, no!" Monica cried, raising her head, her eyes red from weeping, her face damp with tears. "You're such a good man. We couldn't do this to you. We're wrong. We started wrong. We should've been more honest, but I was ashamed. I was afraid. Let's go! let's go!"

"Where you going?" Alipio asked.

"Anywhere," Monica answered. "Forgive us. Forgive me, Mister. Alipio, please."

"What's to forgive? Don't go. We have dinner. But first, let's have *merienda*.[20] I take *merienda*. You do also, don't you? And I don't mean snacks like the Americans."

The sisters exchanged glances, their eyes chattering away.

Alipio chuckled. He wanted to say, talk of lightning striking same fellow twice, but thought better of it. A bad thing to say. Seniang was not lightning. At times only. Mostly his fault. And this girl Monica...Moni? Nice name also. How can this one be lightning?

Mrs. Zafra picked up her purse and before anyone could stop her, she was opening the door. "Where's the nearest grocery store around here?" she asked, but she didn't wait for an answer.

"Come back, come back here, we got lotsa food," Alipio called after her, but he might just as well have been calling the Pacific Ocean.

Mrs. Zafra took time although a supermarket was only a few blocks away. When she returned, her arms were full of groceries in paper bags. Alipio and Monica met her on the porch.

"Comusta?" she asked, speaking in the dialect for the first time as Monica relieved her of her load. The one word question seemed to mean much more than "How are you?" or "How has it been?"

Alipio replied in English. "God dictates," he said, his dentures sounding faintly as he smacked his lips, but he was not looking at the foodstuff in the paper bags Monica was carrying. His eyes were on her legs, in the direction she was taking. She knew where the kitchen was, of course.

He just wanted to be sure she won't lose her way. Like him. On his way to the kitchen, sometimes he found himself in the bedroom. Lotsa things happened to men his age. ◆

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *Baguio:* a pleasant mountain city in northern Philippines
2. *Salinas:* a city on the California coastline
3. *Ilocos:* a province in the northern Philippines
4. *Aklan:* a city on the island of Panay, in the central Philippines
5. *Cebuano:* more Filipinos speak Cebuano as their first language than any of the other 47 native languages spoken in the Philippines. Tagalog, the language spoken in Manila and in the surrounding provinces, is the national language
6. *Ilocano:* a Filipino language spoken in the northern provinces of the Philippines
7. *pinoys:* a term used in reference to people from the Philippines
8. *Chicanos:* a term used to describe Americans of Mexican descent
9. *to joke him* = to joke with him
10. *palsy walsy:* (slang) appearing to be very friendly
11. *barrio:* village (borrowed from Spanish)
12. *Frisco:* San Francisco
13. *vita:* life history
14. *lotsa* = a lot of
15. *dames:* stigmatized term for women
16. *Dabest* = The best
17. *He seemed to have lost the drift of her speech:* He could not logically follow what she was saying
18. *Baseball?:* This refers back to the preceding paragraph in which Monica uses the term "home safe" which reminds Alipio of the baseball idiom "safe at home" when a runner scores a point when he returns to home base.
19. *extension:* extension of Monica's tourist visa
20. *merienda:* a Filipino snack eaten between breakfast and lunch or lunch and dinner.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What do you know about Alipio's first wife? Describe their relationship.*
2. *How does Mrs. Zafra know about Alipio? Why does she come to see him?*
3. *What personal information about herself does Mrs. Zafra share with Alipio? Why does she tell him this information? How does her sister Monica react while Mrs. Zafra tells her story?*
4. *What traditional Filipino customs does Alipio still follow? Why do you think he continues to observe these practices?*
5. *How do you think the lives of Alipio, Monica, and Mrs. Zafra will be one year after the scene in the story?*

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The *Chaser*

JOHN COLLIER

A "chaser" is some mild beverage that is taken after a strong alcoholic drink to "chase" the strong drink down the throat making it easier to swallow. In this story, a lovesick young man is looking for a special mixture to put into the drink of a very special woman.

Alan Austen, as nervous as a kitten, went up certain dark and creaky stairs in the neighborhood of Pell Street, and peered about for a long time on the dim landing before he found the name he wanted written obscurely[1] on one of the doors.

He pushed open this door, as he had been told to do, and found himself in a tiny room, which contained no furniture but a plain kitchen table, a rocking chair, and an ordinary chair. On one of the dirty buff-colored walls were a couple of shelves, containing in all perhaps a dozen bottles and jars.

An old man sat in the rocking chair, reading a newspaper. Alan, without a word, handed him the card he had been given.

"Sit down, Mr. Austen," said the old man very politely. "I am glad to make your acquaintance."[2]

"Is it true," asked Alan, "that you have a certain mixture that has—er—quite extraordinary[3] effects?"

"My dear sir," replied the old man, "my stock in trade is not very large—I don't deal in laxatives[4] and teething mixtures—but such as it is, it is varied. I think nothing I sell has effects which could be precisely described as ordinary."

"Well, the fact is—" began Alan.

"Here, for example," interrupted the old man, reaching for a bottle from the shelf. "Here is a liquid as colorless as water, almost tasteless, quite imperceptible[5] in coffee, milk, wine, or any other beverage. It is also quite imperceptible to any known method of autopsy."[6]

"Do you mean it is a poison?" cried Alan, very much horrified.

"Call it a glove-cleaner if you like," said the old man indifferently. "Maybe it will clean gloves. I have never tried. One might call it a life-cleaner. Lives need cleaning sometimes."

"I want nothing of that sort," said Alan.

"Probably it is just as well," said the old man. "Do you know the price of this? For one teaspoonful, which is sufficient, I ask five thousand dollars. Never less. Not a penny less."

"I hope all your mixtures are not as expensive," said Alan apprehensively.

"Oh dear, no," said the old man. "It would be no good charging that sort of price for a love potion, for example. Young people who need a love potion very seldom have five thousand dollars. Otherwise they would not need a love potion."

"I am glad to hear that," said Alan.

"I look at it like this," said the old man. "Please a customer with one article, and he will come back when he needs another. Even if it is more costly. He will save up for it, if necessary."

"So," said Alan, "you really do sell love potions?"

"If I did not sell love potions," said the old man, reaching for another bottle, "I should not have mentioned the other matter to you. It is only when one is in a position to oblige that one can afford to be so confidential."

"And these potions," said Alan. "They are not just—just—er—"

"Oh, no," said the old man. "Their effects are permanent, and extend beyond the mere casual impulse. But they include it. Oh, yes, they include it. Bountifully, insistently. Ever-lastingly."

"But consider the spiritual side," said the old man.

"I do, indeed," said Alan.

"For indifference," said the old man, "they substitute devotion. For scorn, adoration. Give one tiny measure of this to the young lady—its flavor is imperceptible in orange juice, soup, or cocktails—and however gay and giddy she is, she will change altogether. She will want nothing but solitude, and you.

"I can hardly believe it," said Alan. "She is so fond of parties."

"She will not like them any more," said the old man. "She will be afraid of the pretty girls you may meet."

"She will actually be jealous?" cried Alan in a rapture. "Of me?"

"Yes, she will want to be everything to you."

"She is already. Only she doesn't care about it."

"She will, when she has taken this. She will care intensely. You will be her sole interest in life."

"Wonderful!" cried Alan.

"She will want to know all you do," said the old man. "All that happened to you during the day. Every word of it. She will want to know what you are thinking about, why you smile suddenly, why you are looking sad."

"That is love!" cried Alan.

"Yes," said the old man. "How carefully she will look after you! She will never allow you to be tired, to sit in a draft, to neglect your food. If you are an hour late, she will be terrified. She will think you are killed, or that some siren has caught you."

"I can hardly imagine Diana like that!" cried Alan, overwhelmed with joy.

"You will not have to use your imagination," said the old man. "And by the way, since there are always sirens, if by any chance you should, later on slip a little, you need not worry. She will forgive you, in the end. She will be terribly hurt, of course, but she will forgive you—in the end."

"That will not happen," said Alan fervently.

"Of course not," said the old man. "But, if it did, you need not worry. She would never divorce you. Oh, no! And, of course, she herself will never give you the least, the very least, grounds for—uneasiness."

"And how much," said Alan, "is this wonderful mixture?"

"It is not as dear," said the old man, "as the glove-cleaner, or life-cleaner, as I sometimes call it. No. That is five thousand dollars, never a penny less. One has to be older than you are, to indulge in that sort of thing. One has to save up for it."

"But the love potion?" said Alan.

"Oh, that," said the old man, opening the drawer in the kitchen table, and taking out a tiny, rather dirty-looking phial. "That is just a dollar."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," said Alan, watching him fill it.

"I like to oblige," said the old man. "Then customers come back, later in life, when they are rather better off, and want more expensive things. Here you are. You will find it very effective."

"Thank you again," said Alan. "Goodbye."

"*Au revoir*," said the old man.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *obscurely:* darkly; not clearly expressed or written
2. *acquaintance (I am glad to make your acquaintance.):* I am happy to meet you
3. *extraordinary:* remarkable; exceptional; highly unusual
4. *laxatives:* medicine taken to be able to move one's bowels regularly
5. *imperceptible:* unnoticeable
6. *autopsy:* the examination of a dead body to determine the cause of death
7. *apprehensively:* fearfully
8. *potion:* a mixture to be drunk; a kind of drink
9. *(to) oblige (One is in a position to oblige.):* One is able to do someone else a favor; one is able to help
10. *confidential (One can afford to be confidential.):* private or secret
11. *in a rapture:* carried away by emotion
12. *siren:* a beautiful and tempting woman

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Can you explain the meaning of the title? (Read the introduction to the story again.) What is the chaser?*
2. *What is the reason for the difference in price between the love potion and the "glove-cleaner"?*
3. *Who do you suppose the old man's customers are?*
4. *Will Alan always be happy? Will Diana?*
5. *What is the significance of the old man's final words?*

The Kugelmass Episode

WOODY ALLEN

This is a fantasy about Sidney Kugelmass, an unhappily married college professor. With the help of a magician, he has a love affair with one of the great beauties from world literature. But when the magic breaks down, Kugelmass has serious consequences to face.

Kugelmass, a professor of humanities at City College, was unhappily married for the second time. Daphne Kugelmass was an oaf. He also had two dull sons by his first wife, Flo, and was up to his neck in alimony[1] and child support.

"Did I know it would turn out so badly?" Kugelmass whined to his analyst one day. "Daphne had promise. Who suspected she'd let herself go and swell up like a beach ball? Plus she had a few bucks,[2] which is not in itself a healthy reason to marry a person, but it doesn't hurt, with the kind of operating nut I have. You see my point?"

Kugelmass was bald and as hairy as a bear, but he had soul.

"I need to meet a new woman," he went on. "I need to have an affair. I may not look the part, but I'm a man who needs romance. I need softness, I need flirtation. I'm not getting younger, so before it's too late I want to make love in Venice, trade quips at '21,'[3] and exchange coy glances over red wine and candlelight. You see what I'm saying?"

Dr. Mandel shifted in his chair and said, "An affair will solve nothing. You're so unrealistic. Your problems run much deeper."

"And also this affair must be discreet," Kugelmass continued. "I can't afford a second divorce. Daphne would really sock it to me."

"Mr. Kugelmass—"

"But it can't be anyone at City College, because Daphne also works there. Not that anyone on the faculty at C.C.N.Y.[4] is any great shakes,[5] but some of those coeds…"

"Mr. Kugelmass—"

"Help me. I had a dream last night. I was skipping through a meadow holding a picnic basket and the basket was marked 'Options.' And then I saw there was a hole in the basket."

"Mr. Kugelmass, the worst thing you could do is act out. You must simply express your feelings here, and together we'll analyze them. You have been in treatment long enough to know there is no overnight cure. After all, I'm an analyst, not a magician."

"Then perhaps what I need is a magician," Kugelmass said, rising from his chair. And with that he terminated his therapy.

A couple of weeks later, while Kugelmass and Daphne were moping around in their apartment one night like two pieces of old furniture, the phone rang.

"I'll get it," Kugelmass said. "Hello."

"Kugelmass?" a voice said. "Kugelmass, this is Persky."

"Who?"

"Persky. Or should I say The Great Persky?"

"Pardon me?"

"I hear you're looking all over town for a magician to bring a little exotica[6] into your life? Yes or no?"

"Sh-h-h," Kugelmass whispered. "Don't hang up. Where are you calling from, Persky?"

Early the following afternoon, Kugelmass climbed three flights of stairs in a broken-down apartment house in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn.[7] Peering through the darkness of the hall, he found the door he was looking for and pressed the bell. I'm going to regret this, he thought to himself.

Seconds later, he was greeted by a short, thin, waxy-looking man.

"You're Persky the Great?" Kugelmass said.

"The Great Persky. You want a tea?"

"No, I want romance. I want music. I want love and beauty."

"But not tea, eh? Amazing. O.K., sit down."

Persky went to the back room, and Kugelmass heard the sounds of boxes and furniture being moved around. Persky reappeared, pushing before him a large object on squeaky roller-skate wheels. He removed some old silk handkerchiefs that were lying on its top and blew away a bit of dust. It was a cheap-looking Chinese cabinet, badly lacquered.

"Persky," Kugelmass said, "what's your scam?"[8]

"Pay attention," Persky said. "This is some beautiful effect. I developed it for a Knights of Pythias date last year, but the booking fell through. Get into the cabinet."

"Why, so you can stick it full of swords or something?"

"You see any swords?"

Kugelmass made a face and, grunting, climbed into the cabinet. He couldn't help noticing a couple of ugly rhinestones glued onto the raw plywood just in front of his face. "If this is a joke," he said.

"Some joke. Now, here's the point. If I throw any novel into this cabinet with you, shut the doors, and tap it three times, you will find yourself projected into that book."

Kugelmass made a grimace of disbelief.

"It's the emess,"[9] Persky said. "My hand to God. Not just a novel, either. A short story, a play, a poem. You can meet any of the women created by the world's best writers. Whoever you dreamed of. You could carry on all you like with a real winner. Then when you've had enough you give a yell, and I'll see you're back here in a split second."

"Persky, are you some kind of outpatient?"[10]

"I'm telling you it's on the level," Persky said.

Kugelmass remained skeptical. "What are you telling me—that this cheesy[11] homemade box can take me on a ride like you're describing?"

"For a double sawbuck."[12]

Kugelmass reached for his wallet. "I'll believe this when I see it," he said.

Persky tucked the bills in his pants pocket and turned toward this bookcase. "So who do you want to meet? Sister Carrie? Hester Prynne? Ophelia?[13] Maybe someone by Saul Bellow? Hey what about Temple Drake? Although for a man your age she'd be a workout."

"French. I want to have an affair with a French lover."

"Nana?"

I don't want to have to pay for it."

"What about Natasha in *War and Peace?*"[14]

"I said French. I know! What about Emma Bovary?[15] That sounds to me perfect."

"You got it, Kugelmass. Give me a holler[16] when you've had enough." Persky tossed in a paperback copy of Flaubert's novel.

"You sure this is safe?" Kugelmass asked as Persky began shutting the cabinet doors.

"Safe. Is anything safe in this crazy world?" Persky rapped three times on the cabinet and then flung open the doors.

Kugelmass was gone. At the same moment, he appeared in the bedroom of Charles and Emma Bovary's house at Yonville. Before him was a beautiful woman, standing alone with her back turned to him as she folded some linen. I can't believe this, thought Kugelmass, staring at the doctor's ravishing wife. This is uncanny. I'm here. It's her.

Emma turned in surprise. "Goodness, you startled me," she said. "Who are you?" She spoke in the same fine English translation as the paperback.

It's simply devastating, he thought. Then realizing that it was he whom she had addressed, he said, "Excuse me. I'm Sidney Kugelmass. I'm from City College. A professor of humanities. C.C.N.Y.? Uptown. I—oh, boy!"

Emma Bovary smiled flirtatiously and said, "Would you like a drink? A glass of wine, perhaps?"

She is beautiful, Kugelmass thought. What a contrast with the troglodyte who shared his bed! He felt a sudden impulse to take this vision into his arms and tell her she was the kind of woman he had dreamed of all his life.

"Yes, some wine," he said hoarsely. "White. No, red. No, white. Make it white."

"Charles is out for the day," Emma said, her voice full of playful implication.

After the wine, they went for a stroll in the lovely French countryside. "I've always dreamed that some mysterious stranger would appear and rescue me from the monotony of this crass rural existence," Emma said, clasping his hand. They passed a small church. "I love what you have on," she murmured. "I've never seen anything like it around here. It's so…so modern."

"It's called a leisure suit," he said romantically. "It was marked down." Suddenly he kissed her. For the next hour they reclined under a tree and whispered together and told each other deeply meaningful things with their eyes. Then Kugelmass sat up. He had just remembered he had to meet Daphne at Bloomingdale's. "I must go," he told her. "But don't worry, I'll be back."

"I hope so," Emma said.

He embraced her passionately, and the two walked back to the house. He held Emma's face cupped in his palms, kissed her again, and yelled, "O.K., Persky! I got to be at Bloomingdale's by three-thirty."

There was an audible pop, and Kugelmass was back in Brooklyn.

"So? Did I lie?" Persky asked triumphantly.

"Look, Persky, I'm right now late to meet the ball and chain at Lexington Avenue, but when can I go again? Tomorrow?"

"My pleasure. Just bring a twenty. And don't mention this to anybody."

"Yeah. I'm going to call Rupert Murdoch."

Kugelmass hailed a cab and sped off to the city. His heart danced on point. I am in love, he thought, I am the possessor of a wonderful secret. What he didn't realize was that at this very moment students in various classrooms across the country were saying to their teachers, "Who is this character on page 100? A bald Jew is kissing Madame Bovary?" A teacher in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, sighed and thought, Jesus, these kids, with their pot and acid. What goes through their minds!

Daphne Kugelmass was in the bathroom accessories department at Bloomingdale's when Kugelmass arrived breathlessly. "Where've you been?" she snapped. "It's four-thirty."

"I got held up in traffic," Kugelmass said.

Kugelmass visited Persky the next day, and in a few minutes was again passed magically to Yonville. Emma couldn't hide her excitement at seeing him. The two spent hours together, laughing and talking about their different backgrounds. Before Kugelmass left, they made love. "My God, I'm doing it with Madame Bovary!" Kugelmass whispered to himself. "Me, who failed freshman English."

As the months passed, Kugelmass saw Persky many times and developed a close and passionate relationship with Emma Bovary. "Make sure and always get me into the book before page 120," Kugelmass said to the magician one day. "I always have to meet her before she hooks up with this Rodolphe character."

"Why?" Persky asked. "You can't beat his time?"

"Beat his time. He's landed gentry. Those guys have nothing better to do than flirt and ride horses. To me, he's one of those faces you see in the pages of *Women's Wear Daily*. With the Helmut Berger hairdo. But to her he's hot stuff."

"And her husband suspects nothing?"

"He's out of his depth. He's a lackluster little paramedic who's thrown in his lot with a jitterbug. He's ready to go to sleep by ten, and she's putting on her dancing shoes. Oh, well…See you later."

And once again Kugelmass entered the cabinet and passed instantly to the Bovary estate at Yonville. "How you doing, cupcake?" he said to Emma.

"Oh, Kugelmass," Emma sighed. "What I have to put up with. Last night at dinner, Mr. Personality dropped off to sleep in the middle of the dessert course. I'm pouring my heart out about Maxim's and the ballet, and out of the blue I hear snoring."

"It's O.K., darling. I'm here now," Kugelmass said, embracing her. I've earned this, he thought, smelling Emma's French perfume and burying his nose in her hair. I've suffered enough. I've paid enough analysts. I've searched till I'm weary. She's young and nubile,[24] and I'm here a few pages after Leon and just before Rodolphe. By showing up during the correct chapters, I've got the situation knocked.

Emma, to be sure, was just as happy as Kugelmass. She had been starved for excitement, and his tales of Broadway night life, of fast cars and Hollywood and TV stars, enthralled the young French beauty.

"Tell me again about O.J. Simpson,"[25] she implored that evening as she and Kugelmass strolled past Abbe Bournisien's church.

"What can I say? The man is great. He sets all kinds of rushing records. Such moves. They can't touch him."

"And the Academy Awards?" Emma said wistfully. "I'd give anything to win one."

"First you've got to be nominated."

"I know. You explained it. But I'm convinced I can act. Of course, I'd want to take a class or two. With Strasberg[26] maybe. Then, if I had the right agent—"

"We'll see, we'll see. I'll speak to Persky."

That night, safely returned to Persky's flat, Kugelmass brought up the idea of having Emma visit him in the big city.

"Let me think about it," Persky said. "maybe I could work it. Stranger things have happened." Of course, neither of them could think of one.

"Where the hell do you go, all the time?" Daphne Kugelmass barked at her husband as he returned home late that evening. "You got a chippie[27] stashed somewhere?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm just the type," Kugelmass said wearily. "I was with Leonard Popkin. We were discussing Socialist agriculture in Poland. You know Popkin. He's a freak on the subject."

"Well, you've been very odd lately," Daphne said. "Distant. Just don't forget about my father's birthday. On Saturday?"

"Oh, sure, sure," Kugelmass said, heading for the bathroom.

"My whole family will be there. We can see the twins. And Cousin Hamish. You should be more polite to Cousin Hamish—he likes you."

"Right, the twins," Kugelmass said, closing the bathroom door and shutting out the sound of his wife's voice. He leaned against it and took a deep breath. In a few hours, he told himself, he would be back in Yonville again, back with his beloved. And this time, if all went well, he would bring Emma back with him.

At three-fifteen the following afternoon, Persky worked his wizardry again. Kugelmass appeared before Emma, smiling and eager. The two spent a few hours at Yonville with Binet and then remounted the Bovary carriage. Following Persky's instructions, they held each other tightly, closed their eyes, and counted to ten. When they opened them, the carriage was just drawing up at the side door of the Plaza Hotel, where Kugelmass had optimistically reserved a suite earlier in the day.

"I love it! It's everything I dreamed it would be," Emma said as she swirled joyously around the bedroom, surveying the city from their window. "There's F.A.O. Schwarz.[28] And there's Central Park, and the Sherry is which one? Oh, there—I see. It's too divine."

On the bed there were boxes from Halston and Saint Laurent. Emma unwrapped a package and held up a pair of black velvet pants against her perfect body.

"The slacks suit is by Ralph Lauren," Kugelmass said. "You'll look like a million bucks in it. Come on, sugar, give us a kiss."

"I've never been so happy!" Emma squealed as she stood before the mirror. "Let's go out on the town. I want to see 'Chorus Line' and the Guggenheim and this Jack Nicholson character[29] you always talk about. Are any of his flicks showing?"

"I cannot get my mind around this," a Stanford professor said. "First a strange character named Kugelmass, and now she's gone from the book. Well, I guess the mark of a classic is that you can reread it a thousand times and always find something new."

The lovers passed a blissful weekend. Kugelmass had told Daphne he would be away at a symposium in Boston and would return Monday. Savoring each moment, he and Emma went to the movies, had dinner in Chinatown, passed two hours at a discotheque,[30] and went to bed with a TV movie. They slept till noon on Sunday, visited SoHo, and ogled[31] celebrities at Elaine's. They had caviar and champagne in their suite on Sunday night and talked until dawn. That morning, in the cab taking them to Persky's apartment, Kugelmass thought, It was hectic, but worth it. I can't bring her here too often, but now and then it will be a charming contrast with Yonville.

At Persky's, Emma climbed into the cabinet, arranged her new boxes of clothes neatly around her, and kissed Kugelmass fondly. "My place next time," she said with a wink. Persky rapped three times on the cabinet. Nothing happened.

"Hmmm," Persky said, scratching his head. He rapped again, but still no magic. "Something must be wrong," he mumbled.

"Persky, you're joking!" Kugelmass cried. "How can it not work?"

"Relax, relax. Are you still in the box, Emma?"

"Yes."

Persky rapped again—harder this time.

"I'm still here, Persky."

"I know, darling. Sit tight."

"Persky, we have to get her back" Kugelmass whispered. "I'm a married man, and I have a class in three hours. I'm not prepared for anything more than a cautious affair at this point."

"I can't understand it," Persky muttered. "It's such a reliable little trick."

But he could do nothing. "It's going to take a little while," he said to Kugelmass. "I'm going to have to trip it down. I'll call you later."

Kugelmass bundled Emma into a cab and took her back to the Plaza. He barely made it to his class on time. He was on the phone all day, to Persky and to his mistress. The magician told him it might be several days before he got to the bottom of the trouble.

"How was the symposium?" Daphne asked him that night.

"Fine, fine," he said, lighting the filter end of a cigarette.

"What's wrong? You're as tense as a cat."

"Me? Ha, that's a laugh. I'm as calm as a summer night. I'm just going to take a walk." He eased out the door, hailed a cab, and flew to the Plaza.

"This is no good," Emma said. "Charles will miss me."

"Bear with me, sugar." Kugelmass said. He was pale and sweaty. He kissed her again, raced to the elevators, yelled at Persky over a pay phone in the Plaza lobby, and just made it home before midnight.

"According to Popkin, barley prices in Krakow have not been this stable since 1971," he said to Daphne, and smiled wanly as he climbed into bed.

The whole week went by like that. On Friday night, Kugelmass told Daphne there was another symposium he had to catch, this one in Syracuse. He hurried back to the Plaza, but the second weekend there was nothing like the first. "Get me back into the novel or marry me." Emma told Kugelmass. "Meanwhile, I want to get a job or go to class, because watching TV all day is the pits."[22]

"Fine. We can use the money." Kugelmass said. "You consume twice your weight in room service."[23]

"I met an Off Broadway producer in Central Park yesterday, and he said I might be right for a project he's doing," Emma said.

"Who is this clown?" Kugelmass asked.

"He's not a clown. He's sensitive and kind and cute. His name's Jeff Something-or-Other, and he's up for a Tony."

Later that afternoon, Kugelmass showed up at Persky's drunk.

"Relax," Persky told him. "You'll get a coronary."[24]

"Relax. The man says relax. I've got a fictional character stashed in a hotel room, and I think my wife is having me tailed by a private shamus."[25]

"O.K., O.K., We know there's a problem." Persky crawled under the cabinet and started banging on something with a large wrench.

"I'm like a wild animal," Kugelmass went on. "I'm sneaking around town, and Emma and I have had it up to here[26] with each other. Not to mention a hotel tab[27] that reads like the defense budget."

"So what should I do? This is the world of magic," Persky said. "It's all nuance."

"Nuance, my foot. I'm pouring Dom Perignon and black eggs into this little mouse, plus her wardrobe, plus she's enrolled at the Neighborhood Playhouse and suddenly needs professional photos. Also, Persky, Professor Fivish Kopkind, who teaches Comp Lit and who has always been jealous of me, has identified me as the sporadically appearing character in the Flaubert book. He's threatened to go to Daphne. I see ruin and alimony jail. For adultery with Madame Bovary, my wife will reduce me to beggary."

"What do you want me to say? I'm working on it night and day. As far as your personal anxiety goes, that I can't help you with. I'm a magician, not an analyst."

By Sunday afternoon, Emma had locked herself in the bathroom and refused to respond to Kugelmass's entreaties. Kugelmass stared out the window at the Wollman Rink and contemplated suicide. Too bad this is a low floor, he thought, or I'd do it right now. Maybe if I ran away to Europe and started life over.... Maybe I could sell the *International Herald Tribune*, like those young girls used to.

The phone rang. Kugelmass lifted it to his ear mechanically.

"Bring her over," Persky said. "I think I got the bugs out of it."

Kugelmass's heart leaped. "You're serious?" he said. "You got it licked?"

"It was something in the transmission. Go figure."

"Persky, you're a genius. We'll be there in a minute. Less than a minute."

Again the lovers hurried to the magician's apartment, and again Emma Bovary climbed into the cabinet with her boxes. This time there was no kiss. Persky shut the doors, took a deep breath, and tapped the box three times. There was the reassuring popping noise, and when Persky peered inside, the box was empty. Madame Bovary was back in her novel. Kugelmass heaved a great sigh of relief and pumped the magicians's hand.

"It's over," he said. "I learned my lesson. I'll never cheat again, I swear it." He pumped Persky's hand again and made a mental note to send him a necktie.

Three weeks later, at the end of a beautiful spring afternoon, Persky answered his doorbell. It was Kugelmass, with a sheepish expression on his face.

"O.K., Kugelmass," the magician said. "Where to this time?"

"It's just this once," Kugelmass said. "The weather is so lovely, and I'm not getting any younger. Listen, you've read *Portnoy's Complaint?* Remember The Monkey?"

"The price is now twenty-five dollars, because the cost of living is up, but I'll start you off with one freebie, due to all the trouble I caused you."

"You're good people," Kugelmass said, combing his few remaining hairs as he climbed into the cabinet again. "This'll work all right?"

"I hope. But I haven't tried it much since all that unpleasantness."

"Sex and romance," Kugelmass said from inside the box. "What we go through for a pretty face."

Persky tossed in a copy of *Portnoy's Complaint* and rapped three times on the box. This time, instead of a popping noise there was a dull explosion, followed by a series of crackling noises and a shower of sparks. Persky leaped back, was seized by a heart attack, and dropped dead. The cabinet burst into flames, and eventually the entire house burned down.

Kugelmass, unaware of this catastrophe, had his own problems. He had not been thrust into *Portnoy's Complaint*, or into any other novel, for that matter. He had been projected into an old textbook, *Remedial Spanish*, and was running for his life over a barren, rocky terrain as the word "tener" ("to have")—a large and hairy irregular verb—raced after him on its spindly legs.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *alimony*: a regular payment ordered by the court for support (usually made by a man to his former wife
2. *bucks*: (slang) dollars
3. *trade quips at '21'*: to make jokes and humorous conversation at the nightclub "21"
4. *C.C.N.Y.*: City College New York
5. *great shakes*: (slang) persons who are especially attractive
6. *exotica*: unusual experiences
7. *Bushwick section of Brooklyn*: a neighborhood in the borough of Brooklyn in New York City
8. *scam*: a plan to financially trick someone
9. *emess*: a magical spell
10. *outpatient*: a person who goes into a hospital for treatment but is not required to stay overnight at the hospital
11. *cheesy*: cheap, poor, shoddy
12. *double sawbuck*: (slang) a twenty-dollar bill
13. *Sister Carrie, Hester Prynne, Ophelia*: famous heroines in literature taken from Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*
14. *Natasha in War and Peace*: the heroine of Tolstoy's famous novel
15. *Emma Bovary*: the heroine of Balzac's novel *Madame Bovary*
16. *holler*: shout, yell
17. *uncanny*: strange, mysterious
18. *troglodyte*: a primitive cave dweller
19. *marked down*: reduced in price
20. *the ball and chain*: Kugelmass's wife (reference is to the ball and chain once worn by prisoners to restrict their movement)
21. *a twenty*: a twenty-dollar bill
22. *Rupert Murdoch*: internationally powerful newspaper/media owner
23. *beat his time*: (slang) can't compete with him!
24. *nubile*: of marriageable age or condition
25. *O.J. Simpson*: popular football player during the '70s and '80s
26. *Strasberg*: Lee Strasberg, actor and internationally known acting teacher (his students include Marlon Brando, James Dean, etc.)
27. *"You got a chippie stashed somewhere?"*: Are you having an affair? or Are you keeping a mistress?
28. *F.A.O. Schwarz*: a famous U.S. toy store.
29. *"Chorus Line"... Jack Nicholson*: The Broadway show and the Academy Award winning actor
30. *discotheque*: nightclub
31. *ogled*: stared at with wide eyes
32. *the pits*: the worst possible situation
33. *room service*: hotel food served in the room
34. *coronary*: heart attack
35. *shamus*: detective
36. *have had it up to here*: to have gone beyond the limit of tolerating a bad situation
37. *hotel tab*: hotel bill
38. *Go figure*: Figure out the problem for yourself
39. *pumped Persky's hand*: shook Persky's hand vigorously
40. *'Portnoy's Complaint'*: a popular novel of the '70s written by Philip Roth

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What kind of person is Sidney Kugelmass? Would you like him as a close friend? Why or why not?*
2. *Why is Madame Bovary attracted to Kugelmass? Explain.*
3. *Why does the author make so many references to real people and places? What effect does this have on the story?*
4. *What unforeseen problems complicate Kugelmass's relationship with Madame Bovary?*
5. *Would you have ended the story differently? Explain how.*

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Jun-Hee

MARSHALL N. KLIMASEWISKI

Sigmund Freud believed that dreams revealed a person's subconscious desires. In this story, did the dreams of Jun-Hee and her American husband Tanner shape reality? How does Jun-Hee ultimately use the medium of dreams to put an end to the guilt she feels about losing her baby?

We said the word "abortion" the day the test came back, when we were still in shock, but it was only a formality—an option too familiar for silence but easily crossed off in our excitement. "Jun-Hee, you're pregnant," Tanner whispered. He kept smiling. I questioned our decision, of course—I would feel worse now if I hadn't—especially in the mornings and early evenings during those two weeks when I was miserable and sick on the bathroom tile. I wondered if we had thought things out enough. I wondered what would happen to the comfortable isolation that Tanner and I had built—it would be unfair to keep our child to ourselves like that. I felt the weight through my abdomen and into my thighs, the weight of fear and instinct. I had questions, but each day they moved closer to being the questions of how to do this right and further from the question of whether we should do it at all.

Still, when the child was gone, she left the guilt behind.

My mother came like a thief in the night and took the child from me. I saw her in a dream. There were Tanner and I, up above everything, and the tidy oval of cotton blanket in my arms, the warmth against my chest. Be careful, Tanner said, and we were. There was the sense of accomplishment and wonder, hung across our shoulders like a shawl. And then my mother was below us. Yoo-hoo, she called. Her bright tone frightened me because she was a serious and dour person. I leaned out the window, and she stood on the sidewalk in the burgundy dress that she had worn the last time I saw her. Come down, baby, she called with a smile. She spoke in Korean. She waved to me, or to the child. The child was there in front of me. There was the small sound of wind in my ears, then my mother: Fall down, baby. Come, come. The child was there in front of me and, though I did not give her up, I did not reach to save her. She fell into my mother's arms; there was only the small wind. That's better, my mother whispered, bent over the child. My mother looked up at me—her face was red and swollen with tears.

I let the doctor provide her own explanation; I didn't tell her about my mother. This kind of thing happened, she told us; there was nothing anyone could have done. She said it was an "isolated tragedy;" there was no reason to think that we couldn't try again and have a perfectly healthy baby. The doctor was sorry. "I'm so sorry," she said.

I understood that the dream was something that belonged to both of us, but I didn't tell Tanner. I knew he wouldn't have accepted it. He would have resorted to medical explanations that he knew nothing about, pretending they required less of his faith. I was afraid he would want to talk me out of the dream, as if doing me a favor. I should have told him, but I didn't.

Tanner's instinct was to reason, to use hindsight to reconstruct the past. For him the past was something that led logically and fluidly into the future, like a river. He decided that what had happened was for the best: we had never wanted a child to begin with and had been too caught up in the excitement and the surprise. He compared it to a couple who fall in love at first sight and decide to marry the same day—they're unprepared for the disappointments and boredom of a lifetime; they just want that first day to go on and on.

In the evenings I was haunted by my dream. Tanner and I would lie together, pretending to sleep. I wondered how the child had left my arms; I wondered what Tanner had known when he warned me to be careful. I didn't like my mother's saying "That's better." I didn't like her tears, as if she had done something she hated but was obliged to do. Most of all, I was troubled by the instant in which I could have reached out and taken the baby back. I couldn't see her small face, but I imagined that if I had seen it, her look would have been of surprise and disappointment. I wondered if this was a test that Tanner and I had failed. I wondered if every woman was tested by her own mother before being allowed her pregnancy, and if most of them remembered passing or only felt it as a tightness in their consciences. We never wished the child any harm, I told myself.

Tanner was in a minor accident on his way to work. He made a wide turn pulling into the driveway at his machine shop, and a woman tried to pass him on the right, slamming into his front end. That night he dramatized her crazy defensiveness for me, her flying out of her car. "I thought you were turning left—I was looking, you started left!"

"I had my signal on," he had told her.

"You didn't have your signal on—I looked. I thought you were turning left. I was looking."

It turned out that the insurance company she told him to call had dropped her four months before, and she actually had no insurance. She was recently divorced, and working for the first time in her life at the age of forty-seven, for five-fifty an hour. The bottom line was that we would either break this woman's back or pay for the damage ourselves. I didn't know whether to be mad at the woman for allowing herself to be so dependent on her former husband or sorry for her as a victim of her dependence. What surprised me, though, was the way it weighed on Tanner. At dinner he furrowed his brow and winced, as if carrying on his own debate. I bit my wineglass to keep from laughing, and finally I asked, "What is it, Tanner?"

He looked surprised to find me still at the table. "Think about it," he said.

He was so serious I couldn't help laughing. "Think about what? Think about a woman screwed by her husband and by a culture that says it's ladylike to be dependent? Come on, Tanner, that's old news."

"That's not what I mean." He shook his head.

I thought maybe my tone had been a little cruel. "I'm sorry," I told him.

He stared vacantly at the table and shook his head. He said, "I was driving down a road I drive every day, a road I've driven for four years, turning in to a driveway I've turned in to a thousand times. Maybe I was worried about the furnace for Honeywell, I don't know. I started my turn without thinking."

He sat back and shrugged his shoulders. "I probably did make a wide turn, I probably do every time." Tanner wore the concerned look that I had seen before. It meant only that the logic and order of his world were temporarily being put into question: could it really be that there were unexplainable events? Heavens! I wanted to kiss him.

"Then she slams into me," he continued, gesturing, "and suddenly I'm in the world of things beyond myself. There are traffic noises, and there's a desperate woman begging me to say it wasn't her fault, and it's raining, even."

Tanner shook his head and smiled and I went to him. I knelt on the floor and laid my head and my arms in his lap. He ran his fingers across my back.

"Lots of things have nothing to do with us," he said. I laughed then, and soon he did, too. "You know what I mean." He smiled and shook his head, yet again.

"You're going to wear out your neck," I told him.

I called my father in Seoul, catching him in the morn-ing before he went to work. I had only talked to him twice in the fifteen months since my mother's death, so I asked if he was lonely. First he said, "You should hear yourself, Jun-Hee, you speak your Korean like a foreigner." Then he answered my question. "No, your mother and I talk more now than we did when we were together. She's become more thoughtful in death; she has more to say."

"Where do you speak?" I asked. I heard the front door open and Tanner came in. He was home early from work; he carried a bag of groceries in one arm. I waved to him and tried to look happily surprised.

"What do you mean?" my father said. "We talk wherever she wants to. Sometimes she asks me questions at work, in front of a manager or a clerk. Questions she knows will make me angry and want to answer her there."

Tanner began to unload groceries into the refrigerator and the cabinets. I took the phone out to the porch. "Can't you just think back an answer? You don't really have to talk, do you?"

"No, Jun-Hee, I talk. She talks to me; I talk back. It's a conversation."

"Forgive me; I'm not up on all of this." There was a short silence between us.

"She said she's seen you," my father continued.

I felt my stomach turn. "Really? "I asked. "What else did she say about me?"

"She said she took your baby."

I swallowed hard and sat down. "That's true." I kept my back to the kitchen and there was no sound, I guessed that Tanner might have gone to the bedroom to change. "It was a terrible thing for her to do." I knew that he would disagree, that my father believed our future lay in the hands of the dead. Like fate, they could do no wrong or right. There was a low rattle across the phone line. He didn't have to answer me, but in his long silence there seemed an intentional cruelty. "Did she tell you why?" I asked, and I was surprised to find myself crying.

"No." His voice was sad, yet resigned. My father carried a self-control that exerted its presence on anyone near him. With a conscious depth in his voice, he said, "I know why, though. She told me something before she died." He waited. Finally, he said, "She told me she forgives you. She said, 'I have forgiven our Jun-Hee and you will, too. But her children never will. They'll never have America and they'll never have Korea. The voices of their ancestors will be too tangled to hear.'"

I wiped a hand across my face and felt angry at my own ridiculous tears. I was careful to keep them from my voice. "She had no right to say that. You both knew that Tanner and I had no plans for children." I whispered now, I don't know why. "She had no right to take our child, to decide for us."

"Don't argue with me, I'm telling you what she said. Besides, Jun-Hee, children or not, the fact is you've brought the end of our family. It's not your mother's fault."

My head was swimming and I felt suddenly foolish for calling him. Could I have expected anything better than this? I disconnected the line. I sat still a moment and wiped my eyes again. Then I went to the kitchen and hung up the phone. Tanner was out of sight. On the porch I sat in a frayed lawn chair. I wondered if my father was pleased by the phone call, or if he could still feel bad for me. I began to cry again—it felt natural, and I decided not to be embarrassed. I knew the next time I talked to him, in a month or a year, there would be no reference to any of this. We would act as if it hadn't happened and resume our careful roles. And wasn't that the way I wanted it? Wasn't the distance what I had wanted since leaving Korea?

Tanner came out onto the porch; he had changed into shorts and a T-shirt. His right hand was taped up and his pinkie was stiff with a splint. He sat down in the chair across from me, and I sniffled and leaned forward.

"I got in another accident," he said, smiling and holding the hand out. "Broke the finger in two places. I may have totalled the rental car."

He laughed and I did, too. I wiped my eyes. "What happened?" I asked.

"I missed a possum and hit a tree in the process. My pinkie turned backward when my hand hit the dash."

"Tanner." I sat beside him and he laughed again. "What should we do with you?"

He said, "I blacked out for a minute, too. They took me to the hospital, but the doctor decided my head was all right."

"You should have called me."

"The doctor laughed when I told him the whole story."

I smiled and shook my head. "And then you went and got groceries?"

"I called Frank at the shop, and he drove me home. I'm starving."

I went to a Catholic church where I knew two Korean families worshipped. I didn't expect to see either of them; it was just the only church in the area that I knew anything about. I picked a Thursday morning—for some reason I didn't want Tanner to know—and I called the lab to tell Alex I'd be late to work.

My mother never left the Buddhasasana,[*] though she had to face cruel jokes from my father whenever she voiced her beliefs. He'd had a Protestant "uncle" from Britain when he was young—actually just a close friend of his father's. There was always his proud insistence that he was a Protestant, his telling me, often while angry or drinking, the story of Christ. Later, when I took a class in college here, I realized how little he really understood Christianity and how his Mahayana Buddhist upbringing had not left him.

I knew the connection to my mother was thin in this church. But I went for my own sake—maybe I would feel closer to her.

It was a new, squat building with white aluminum siding and very few windows—industrial-strength religion, I suppose. The only sign of holiness was a small golden cross, perched at the crown of the roof like a weathervane. I arrived at twenty after eight and the next mass was scheduled for nine, which didn't bother me at all. I didn't feel up to the crowd or the structure of a mass—it was the first time I had been in a church in six years, and the last time had been for our wedding.

I found a pew far enough from the altar not to feel intimidated but close enough to help me work up something like a prayer. I folded my hands in my lap. There was a ceramic figure of the Virgin Mary hanging by the altar, and I found her eyes meeting my own.

When I thought of the baby I pictured the bundle of blanket from the dream. But I knew my child had been little more than a fertilized egg and a lot of blood. There were the films I had seen in college charting the development of the fetus—the tight curl of the back, the odd, oversized head, the arms and hands and dark-red fingers. I stared at Mary, at the wrinkled blue of her ceramic gown, at her wide shoulders and small breasts. Finally I asked to speak to my mother. Despite what my father had said, I only spoke in thoughts.

I closed my eyes and that helped me to concentrate, to see her in my memory. "I want to talk to you. What you did to Tanner and me was wrong. I want to know why you did it. I deserve an explanation."

I pictured my mother in her burgundy, Western-style dress, the one she had worn in the dream. I pictured her hearing me and considering an answer. I imagined the weight of wisdom and perspective in her features—the confidence of the dead, the thoughtfulness that my father had mentioned. I wondered what she had done with my daughter, and I wanted to see the child, too, but my imagination had limits.

I waited. When I opened my eyes, the church held a yellow glow from the candlelight and the morning sun through the high windows. There was a clean smell, like varnish.

"I don't understand," I whispered. There was no one close enough to overhear. I rested my chin on my folded hands, on the back of the pew before me. "I don't know, I don't know if this church helps anything or not, for you. I'm very serious, though. I don't think I'm asking too much."

I waited. I thought of my mother in Korea, of the continual shuffle of her slippers and the hollow quiet in her eyes. I imagined her caring for my child in death, a grandmother, and I began to feel the heaviness of self-pity in my stomach. "You owe me this," I whispered, trying not to be bitter or pitiful. I stood to go. At the last minute I decided to cross myself.

At work, Tanner left the power on while he was wiring a control box and gave himself a shock that could have been fatal. When he called me at the lab I could hear a smile in his voice, but he was no longer up to a laugh. "What do you think it is?" I asked. "Can this really be just coincidence?"

"I don't know."

I waited. "Tanner, maybe you should talk to someone who knows something about this."

"Yeah," he said, as if he had already considered this. "Join the analyst generation, huh? "

"No, just get some help, before you kill yourself."

"I'm not going to kill myself. I just—I don't know. I think it's that my mind's been elsewhere a lot. Both accidents happened while I was doing something routine—I wasn't even thinking. The possum accident I had no control over. Sometimes I wonder if I'm subconsciously punishing myself."

"For what? That's ridiculous."

"Maybe," he laughed, though it was not a pleasant laugh, "but so is wrecking two cars and electrocuting yourself in one week. It's pathetic, Jun-Hee. I haven't felt this clumsy since puberty. I'm like some teenager."

Alex walked by my cubicle and gave the microscope a heavy glance, as if I were invisible unless bent over the eyepiece. He went on into his office without a word. "Well," I said to Tanner, "I just don't buy the do-it-yourself Freud." I waited for a response, but all he said was "Uh-huh."

"Listen," I said. "I have to go. Alex is on the prowl.

I'm coming home soon, though, and we'll heat up some leftovers. I'll bring us a bottle of wine. You are old enough to drink, aren't you, my late bloomer?"

Late in the evening, we lay together on the sofa with the lights out and I kissed his smooth chest, both of his tiny pink nipples. We hadn't spoken for some time. When Tanner began, his tone was distant, as if from somewhere in his memory.

"The night before we lost the baby," he said, "I lay beside you in bed and I couldn't sleep. You had been out cold for a while. At some point, I decided to turn the spare room into a nursery, all in my mind."

He paused. I put my ear to his chest and heard the even thump of his heart. He said, "I took down the ridiculous wallpaper first thing. I painted the walls a light blue, with white clouds spread across the ceiling. I went slowly, taking the time to imagine everything until I could see it. You know?"

I nodded against his chest. I touched the curve of his side. "Yes."

"I put in baseboards all the way around, nice stained wood. I stencilled tumbling clowns across them, and yellow tulips. I replaced the bed with a crib made of white painted wicker. Then I hung a mobile above the crib—blue waves and silver dolphins. Every detail, Jun-Hee."

I closed my eyes and imagined the room for myself.

"In place of our dresser I put one made of the same painted wicker, with drawers that smelled like cedar and a cloth top, for changing diapers, that smelled of talcum. In place of the desk went the bassinet and a hamper."

I touched his stomach and I heard his voice from within his chest. He bent one knee and turned close against me.

"On the wall I hung a bright-faced clock with fat numbers and a mouse on the minute hand. Everything. When I was done I looked at the alarm clock in our room and it had taken me two full hours. Just to imagine it and plan it out. I still couldn't sleep, though, so I got out of bed and went down the hall. I walked through the room for a while and I looked out the window, past the crib." He paused. "I imagined the view in the morning."

I touched the deep curve above his hip and I closed my eyes. I thought of where I had been that night, with the child and my mother, while Tanner built his nursery. It seemed to me, here and now, that the accumulation of six years of marriage hadn't closed the distances I had thought it would.

When he spoke again, his voice had come back beside me. "It's the coldest room in the house—I thought about it later. It's on that corner with just the one duct. It never would have worked."

"It could have," I said.

"No, it's too far from our room. We wouldn't have heard the baby when it woke at night and began to cry."

"We would have," I said.

He hit himself on the thumb with a hammer—not a hard thing to do, really. Then he got a sleeve caught in some kind of standup drill, but it only scratched his wrist and ripped the shirt. I told him he should stay in his office more, maybe stick to the telephone and a dull pencil.

"Thanks for the confidence," he said. "That's exactly what Frank said—for the sake of the company insurance policy if not for my own good."

The next day he decided we needed a trip. He planned the whole thing out before springing it on me. We would go up to New Hampshire and hike in the White Mountains, a "someday" he'd been talking about for quite a while. We could do two day-hikes, and find a cheap motel for the Saturday night between. Friday, on the way up, we would spend with his mother—who was beginning to recover from her stroke—at her house in White River Junction.

It all sounded right to me and we just did it. We both had the vacation day coming, we both knew the break was overdue; we simply decided to take it the very next weekend, and packed.

The day before we left, I got our monthly checking statement in the mail. There were two checks written by Tanner to a Janet Holden, each for a hundred dollars and each written on a payday. It took me a minute to realize that Janet Holden was the woman who had hit Tanner's car, the woman with no insurance. At first there was something like jealousy, but it didn't take long for the feeling to pass. I wondered why he hadn't said anything—I was the one who balanced our checkbook, so paying with a check was as good as telling me. I wondered if she had asked for this, and how they decided on exactly a hundred dollars for each check. I felt a little angry, too—we already had close to a thousand dollars in repair bills from the two car accidents, and I wondered how long he intended to keep up these payments. I didn't want to play the role of the nagging wife, or to give him the role of the good-hearted but misunderstood husband, so I decided to let him come and explain it to me. I left the statement out on our desk, so he would know that I had seen it.

That night he said nothing, though I was sure he'd seen the statement. Friday morning we packed up the car and left.

We took the back way, up some beautiful roads, through the Berkshires on Route 7 and into Vermont. Tanner worried about seeing his mother again. It had been four months since a stroke left her virtually paralyzed from the neck down. He had spent a week and a half with her when she got out of the hospital, and we'd been up twice since. She had a full-time nurse and refused to live anywhere but in her own home—a fact that bothered Tanner but that went right along with everything I had admired in her since we'd first met. Besides, I was pretty sure that Tanner's real complaint about her stubbornness had nothing to do with her well-being. He wanted either the confident, independent, and aggressively healthy mother he had always had or a withered and resigned shell that he could remember her in. This in-between stuff scared him—could this person who had to be fed and bathed and changed by a nurse still be the same mother who had raised him? I never would have told Tanner any of this but I saw that his mother knew it, too. There was a small distance between them since the stroke, and I could tell it hurt them both.

The live-in nurse, whose name was Mrs. Carlis, greeted us from the doorway of his mother's house. "There they are," she called as we stepped out of the car. "Right on time." She was a loud and smothering[9] person, sometimes to the point of being patronizing.[10] The kind of woman who wore no makeup on principle, and was sure to tell you so within an hour of meeting you. She made me laugh.

Tanner's mother was charming and affectionate, clearly excited about our sudden visit. Tanner kissed her cheek and took her folded hands from her lap. He squatted before her wheelchair and whispered something to her; I looked out the window to let them be alone. In a minute his mother said, "Oh, stop it. Get lost now, and let me talk to your wife."

We all sat through the last of the afternoon on her patio. Tanner actually blushed as he went through the list of accidents for his mother, and she smiled with concern and sadness. Occasionally she asked Mrs. Carlis to cross or uncross her legs for her, or to find her sun hat. In the time since our last visit, I had forgotten the stillness with which she listened to people now—her concentration was both flattering and intimidating. But Mrs. Carlis carried the burden of tsks and sighs and waved hands for both of them. "Oh, no," Mrs. Carlis said to Tanner. "Oh, that's terrible. My goodness, what you've been through."

His mother said, "Do you expect more damage, or is this it now?"

Tanner shrugged. "If I knew—you know. I don't expect anything else; I didn't expect any of it."

"That's good," she said. "Don't lose your confidence, Tanner." She smiled. "Just the same, we'll go with paper plates and plastic knives for dinner, I suppose." We laughed.

In the evening Tanner went out for ice cream and Mrs. Carlis disappeared into her room. "One thing I'll give her," Tanner's mother whispered to me, "she's careful to allow me some privacy."

"That's important," I said.

"Yes. She's O.K. She's better than you might think. Sometimes I like her chatter—it keeps me from feeling lonely. And when I'm tired of her, I say so. She understands."

I nodded. She asked me about Tanner—what I thought was causing all of his accidents. I said I didn't know, but I couldn't believe it was just coincidence anymore. "No," she said, "I think he's expecting things to go wrong. There's something in the way he walks, I think. Maybe the eyes—I'm not sure what. Then she said what we were both really thinking, a talent of hers. "I believe it's his way of dealing with the miscarriage."

She waited for my reaction. I didn't like the word "miscarriage." I thought it laid the blame on me, as though I had mishandled my own uterus. I instantly felt a powerful urge to tell her my dream, though—to explain what had really happened and to hear her advice.

When I was still quiet she asked, "How about you? Any of your own self-punishment? Any feelings of guilt?" There was empathy[11] in her voice, nothing accusing or patronizing. I had given up comparisons to my own mother a long time ago, but there were still moments of envy.

"I don't know," I said. There's guilt, sure. Some times I wonder how much we really wanted a baby. You know we never planned to have any."

"Yes."

I wanted to tell her; the whole dream was there, and until that moment I hadn't realized quite how heavy it was for me to carry alone. My father had certainly been no help. But the truth was I really didn't know this woman as well as I sometimes pretended to. I was afraid of her reaction, and maybe a little selfish about the dream by now.

I said, "Tanner thinks it was all for the best, that maybe we weren't ready for her."

"It was a girl?"

I was momentarily shocked—I had never thought twice. "I guess so. In my mind it was." We both heard Tanner's car come up the driveway.

She said, "I hope you won't feel I'm butting in if I tell you this; no one is ever ready, Jun-Hee. It's the people who think they're ready who end up in trouble. You should try again. Tanner told me what the doctor said—that it was an isolated thing—and I think the best way for both of you to get over this is to try again. You'll have a perfect child this time."

The front door opened and Tanner came in, wiping his feet on the mat. I was thankful for his timing, because I didn't know what to say. He held up a plastic bag with a quart of ice cream inside. "Mint chocolate chip," he announced—it was my favorite.

That night we slept together in the twin bed that had been Tanner's since childhood. Each time we slept over, we both went through the shifting positions that I remembered from the nights we'd spent together in college: lying close and entangled at first, separating slowly as our limbs became numb and sleep began to feel more important than intimacy, finally dividing the narrow bed into individual spaces, like children in the back seat of a car.

Tonight I found myself unable to sleep. I lay with my back to Tanner and my cold feet tucked beneath his calves. The shades on the windows were pulled, and they gave the darkness of the room a depth and a texture. I imagined that I could see the waves of Tanner's even breath, the way I have sometimes seen the landscape of music. I let myself fall into the ebb and the flow, but there was still the loneliness.

And the distance. I had been in this country for a long time, two years of high school and into college, with the phone calls and my mother weeping and the letters full of affection and guilt, before I understood that the distance was inside me, that it was me. She told me that when I was born she had an idea; she claimed it came to her in the painful moments of my birth, when nothing else could get through: she saw before her each year of my life, each its own instant, a rapid film from birth to death. She saw that I would live long, that I would age well, with a straight back.

The first birthdays I don't remember, of course, though I have seen the photos. They dressed me in a silk kimono[11]—royal blue, a new size each year. My parents were not wealthy when I was young, and this was an unusual extravagance. By my thirteenth birthday, the robes were hanging in their own closet—a rising sea of blue—each worn only once.

In the earliest years that I can recall, when I was five and six, there was expectation and excitement. Before dawn my mother would come with a candle, and the new robe folded over one arm, and a wide smile—a rare gift. Together we dressed me in the thick whispers of the fabric and in our ceremonial silence. Her hands moved continuously—straightening, creasing, cupping, nervous.

My father would have the camera ready on a crude stand—they counted floorboards to be sure of the distance. I stood before the screen that had come from a fisherman in my mother's village, three generations before her. It was a dream: the carp leapt from the river and danced, each tree held its own moon. My shoulders back, arms by my sides, I stared straight into the camera.

When I was positioned, my father and my mother took their places behind the camera and together we waited for dawn. I had been born at dawn—the timing was important. The long window behind them faced east to the bald hills, but they stood with their backs to it, their eyes set on me. I had to watch the camera, but I learned how wide peripheral vision[11] could be. They stood together but never close, my father's hand on the camera, my mother's heavy stare watching for the first rosy light to fall across my cheeks. With each year this stiff wait began to swallow the rest of the ceremony. I learned to dread my birthday. When I was young I thought that it was customary, that everyone went through this. Later I was embarrassed; I stopped telling friends and nagged my mother until she hid the blue kimonos in a box under the bed.

In the photos the progression was clear: the shadings in my face from pride to concentration to boredom and resentment. I knew early that these photos belonged to my mother, that they were her prophecy fulfilled. But for each year I have an image of my own as well. In mine her own progression is the same: from pride to sadness and disappointment. There is the morning, coming through the windows to surround her, and the stillness, the empty promise. Sometimes I flinched at the click of the camera, suddenly remembering that I was posing, that this was a year of my life.

I listened to Tanner's deep breathing. I eased my legs out of the covers and tiptoed to the door. In the living room I found the phone easily—here the shades were up and the night was full of the moon. I dialled my father's number while counting the hours: he would be just home from work.

The connection was bad—pops and clicks, the muffled echo of the ring. It occurred to me that I had nothing to say to him, that he was only a way to her. His phone rang. I struggled for some connection, some way to get to my dream, but eventually I realized that no one would answer. He wasn't home. I hung up the phone and sat back on the couch. The nighttime was pale through the windows.

I waited. Then I reached my arms out and I felt the small weight and warmth, supported in my hands. I lunged forward—in that instant I didn't have to think or decide, because she was falling. I reached out and took her from the air. I took her in and I whispered to her. I held her hard against my chest.

It was really only a drizzle on the road the next morning, and sometimes it stopped completely for a stretch. The sky was all grey, though, with no sign of light. When we were almost there we stopped at a visitors' center and asked a forest ranger about trail conditions. The woman smiled her way through a long list of warnings: trails may be wet and footing slippery, step with care; temperatures can drop thirty degrees in a matter of hours, always pack prepared; conditions above tree line can change in minutes, keep an eye on the sky. She talked us out of Mt. Madison—not today—and recommended a peak called Mt. Hale instead. She sold us a map and pointed out the most dangerous trails. Her brown uniform was starched and she never bent her back. "Enjoy your stay in the White Mountains," she said.

We drove the few miles to the trailhead, Tanner imitating her perfect posture, and parked our car by the narrow opening through the trees. We checked the map once more, then started up the first trail to the Hale mountain cutoff. There were exposed roots and shallow puddles all over the trail, but we were wearing sneakers and the footing wasn't really so bad. In the distance, which-ever way you looked, the trees seemed to mesh with the low sky into a gauzy gray.[14] Occasional branches stretched across the trail and showered us when we cleared the way.

Tanner was bubbly, happy to be here at last. He decided the weather would clear when we were at the top and tomorrow would be a perfect day and we would probably see some deer or moose. I laughed.

We crossed a fast river on a footbridge and soon the trail began to rise more sharply. The rain picked up a little, but we could hardly tell beyond the sound it made on the ceiling of leaves above us. Our breathing picked up as well, and I could feel the sweat run down my back and the insides of my arms. We began to take short breaks, to rest our calves and to take the packs from our shoulders. At one point there was a rocky, exposed outcropping, and the day was full of fog. Below us the trees fell off into a green carpet and were lost.

It happened slowly, but somewhere along the way the mountain became much steeper. We took breaks more often, but we didn't talk much—in a way, it didn't seem necessary. We smiled, though; we were both having fun.

At some point I began to think about the woman with the car who hit Tanner—I couldn't remember her name. I thought of asking him right then about the checks, but the trail zigzagged up a sharp slope, and it just seemed like too much effort. Soon I decided that I wouldn't ask, that he had no right to play this silence game when he knew that I knew. The whole thing reminded me of something my father would do.

Maybe we were both a little lost in thought, but it seemed that suddenly the trees were much shorter and the fog was tight and cool. "We must be close to tree line," Tanner said, and in a few minutes we were there. The trees receded into tough, squat shrubs and we were literally in a cloud. It was fantastic. You could only see maybe a hundred feet in any direction and the mist rolled and tumbled across the rocks and up the mountain. It wasn't really raining now, but the fog was so heavy that it turned into drops on our parkas. In only a minute, there were diamonds sown through Tanner's hair and across his eyebrows and hanging, even, from his lashes.[15]

"This is strange," he said.

"It's amazing." The silence was fuzzy and hollow, as if it would swallow up even a scream. Tanner took my hand, and I realized how wonderfully alone we were. How isolated—we hadn't come upon another hiker all day.

"What time do you think it is?" he asked me. I looked at my watch, it was past twelve-thirty.

"Well," he said, "what do you think?"

He was asking what we should do, and I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe he could actually consider turning back. "We must be pretty close," I said. The weather's the same as it's been all day; it's not even raining, really. Where's that map? Let's see where we are."

We looked at the map but we didn't know how to tell how far we had come. It didn't show any tree line, and on the back it explained that the level varied in different places across the mountain, depending on exposure.

"We can't be too far," I said. "I can't imagine giving up now."

"O.K."

"We can have lunch at the peak. Maybe it'll clear a little and we'll get a view. Who knows?"

"O.K.," he said.

"Tanner. Do you want to do this?"

"Yeah." He nodded and avoided my eyes. Finally he looked at me. "Yes, I do. I really do. Let's just keep an eye on the sky, as our friendly ranger says."

It didn't take long for the shrubs to give way to bare rock, with rock piles stacked a few feet high to show the trail. At first we could see two or three markers ahead, but eventually the fog revealed only one at a time. The cloud moved past us and straight up the mountain, and I imagined that it could carry us, that we could close our eyes and let ourselves be lifted to the peak and across it into the sky.

Just when we were both beginning to lose some confidence (at least I was; Tanner's concerned expression looked set and permanent) we came to a wooden sign knocked in between the rocks. It marked the separation of two trails. One way led down a half mile to a mountain hut, and the other a mile up to the peak of Mt. Hale. We took the Hale fork, and for a while it was mostly flat—even downhill in places—and we moved quickly. At one point Tanner made a small jump between rocks, but his foot slid when he landed. He skinned the palm of one hand and tore a small hole in the knee of his jeans.

"Put some antibiotic on your hand," I said.

He shook his head. "I don't want any. I'm fine." He didn't look at me.

Soon the trail turned back uphill, as we both knew it had to, and I began to wonder if our cloud wasn't getting darker. For the first time, the possibility of a thunderstorm occurred to me. I couldn't understand why we hadn't made the peak yet, and I kept looking ahead for the levelling off and the top of the mountain.

Then Tanner just stopped. I sensed everything right away, but when he said, "I don't know where the trail went," I came very close to crying. We looked in all directions for a marker.

"Let's backtrack," I said, but we each had a different idea of the way we'd come. For a few minutes I followed Tanner, but I knew he was going too directly downward—we had come up and across.

"This is wrong," I said. "I think the trail's to the right some." But he kept walking. I stopped. "Tanner. You already got us lost. You don't know where you're going." Now he stopped. He sat down heavily and lay back against his pack. There was something unnatural and afraid in his face.

I knelt beside him. "We can't be far, really. Why don't we look at the map?"

He held his hands interlocked over his closed eyes, the palms outward. One was spotted with thin lines of blood from the scratches. He shook his head. "What good is the map if we're not on a trail? We don't even know how to use the fucking thing."

I felt it all drain out of me—my energy, maybe, my confidence, any last traces of enthusiasm I had for this trip. I said, "When's the last time you remember seeing a marker? How long ago?" He shook his head. "Tanner, what's the matter? Are you sick or something? You're acting strange."

I expected him to open his eyes, to sit up and take my hand or even to smile. But all he did was shake his head again. "You're scaring me," I said. Finally he opened his eyes and sat up with a grunt.

"Let's eat lunch." I took my pack off and opened it. "Let's eat something and have some water and try to think about this without panicking. All right, Tanner?"

Tanner closed his eyes and nodded. I was thankful for a reaction that made sense. He took his pack off.

"I don't know what I was thinking," Tanner said. He bit into a sandwich and stared at the rocks and the fog. "I thought I could tell the trail by the smooth rocks. I forgot about the markers." He laughed. "All the rocks are smooth."

We cut straight across the mountain and I kept thinking I saw the vague form of a marker emerging, but it never happened. I kept my watch out now—it was already close to three, and in this weather it would be dark well before eight. I began to lead and Tanner followed me with his head down, watching each step. I got angry. "Tanner, what are you doing? You're not even looking for the trail."

"I don't want to slip again," he said. He held his palm up for me.

"Let's stop a minute and put something on that. Please?"

We got out the first-aid kit and I rubbed antibiotic cream into his cuts. "I figure if we find the trail," I said, just thinking of it then, "we can follow it to that hut.

It's not very far, and maybe we could spend the night there." It occurred to me that I was treating him like a child. "You lead," I said.

Tanner seemed to look ahead for the trail now, and I found my mind wandering. I imagined that if the sun burned through for just a minute or two we would see the markers and the shape of the mountain around us. Maybe the trail would be right there, a few yards away. Suddenly, for no reason, the name came to me—Janet Holden. I could see it written across the canceled checks. I felt lonely; I felt lost in a world so far from all of that. I told myself, We woke up this morning in Tanner's tiny bed in White River. Tonight we'll sleep in a lumpy motel bed, or in a sleeping bag at the warm hut. I promised myself that I'd be thankful.

Janet Holden, Janet Holden. It ran through my mind with each step I took, like a drumbeat. I couldn't get rid of it. Janet Holden.

When it was almost five o'clock, my shoulders were burning under the pack and my legs were rubber. I realized, at last, that Tanner had completely given up. I felt that this was the overdue end of a long collapse for him, and I was both sorry and angry. I was angry at the pity I felt, too, and at the fact that he had come to this. I found that there was some small part of me, somewhere behind my ribs, that could hate him. But this wasn't Tanner anymore; I was alone.

At some point I began to cry, and I sat down and let it come. Tanner lay back on the rock beside me, acting as though he couldn't hear me. I got so angry that I punched him hard on the arm. He jumped and glared at me.

"Oh, he lives!" I yelled. "He still feels pain—thank God for that."

Tanner rubbed his arm. I was busy crying and I didn't notice the change, but after a while he spoke. "We should go down," he said softly.

"What?"

"We should go down. Straight down. We'll have shelter in the trees. We might be able to find water."

I continued to cry, despite myself. I hugged him and leaned against him, though the anger was still there. "You had no right to leave me alone," I said. "You can't do that—you had no right."

He did hug me back. When I was under some kind of control, he stood and helped me up. He said, "Let's get to the trees, at least," and started down. I watched him a minute. It seemed to me that I would have a hard time forgiving him for this. I had the feeling of some kind of ending—not of our marriage or anything as easy at that. I didn't know what. It was the feeling I had the morning I lost the child.

The way down was steep, and the silence of the fog wrapped thickly around me. I listened for my own breathing, but that sound was gone, too. I imagined that I could let go, just let myself lean over and begin to fall. I would tumble down the long slope; I would land in the wet embrace of a lake.

And then, in no time at all, Tanner saw the sign to the hut. He pointed and said, "There it is," almost casually. It was the same wooden trail marker we had come to hours before. As a celebration, we ate the last of our sandwiches and a good part of our trail mix. We followed the trail down, and neither of us lost sight of the stone markers. In a few minutes, the eerie shape of the hut emerged from the muddy gray.

There was a couple from upstate New York who lent us sweatshirts and pants to wear while we dried our own by a kerosene heater. We had missed dinner, but one of the workers at the hut made us hot soup and coffee. At first she seemed to think I wouldn't understand English; she leaned in to me and spoke slowly. I decided not to be offended, and when I answered her question fluently she seemed to apologize with her gestures and her smile.

Later the thunder came, distant and slow at first, then completely surrounding us. Lightning flashed across the mountain, and the shadows were quick and long. Tanner came to me; he knelt down and laid his head in my lap. He put his arms around my waist. At first I felt the stares and the murmurs from across the room. I touched his hair and his face, and I found that he was crying. I leaned across his back. I missed him, as if we were still apart. I kissed his hair and accepted his apology; it was surprisingly easy.

We slept on a wooden bunk in a borrowed sleeping bag. Tanner was asleep in a minute, and I was surprised to find myself awake. When I closed my eyes I saw an endless pattern of rocks; I felt the stepping up and the stepping down still in my bones. I opened my eyes and listened to the sound of the rain against the roof. I prayed. In Korean I recited one of the meditations I had learned as a child from my mother, the only one I could remember. I asked the bodhisattvas to help me to accept the world of dukkha and impermanence, to help me shed my desire to control. The world is change; I am change. Maybe I felt better—I don't know.

My baby was gone and there was really only Tanner and I, as I had once wanted it. My mother had never been with me, not since I left Seoul. The day she died, I had pretended it didn't matter. I went through the whole day at a distance from myself; I decided that it would take a lifetime to get back to her. My father asked me to come for the burial, and I said no.

This night I went back, though; I tried to cover the distance. It was fifteen years since I'd been in Korea, but I knew that she would not come to me, that she had made the reach already, for the last time. Fifteen years is a long way to fall, and I was afraid. I let the silence of the hut calm me.

There in the dark I said to her, I know I gave up my child. I'm sorry I let you down.

I saw her. She stood before me in black burial gown; she lowered her eyes before her daughter. In the dream I told her, Take care of my baby, and she bowed. The clouds moved around us and across the stones, and she bowed for an eternity. I wanted to touch her skin, but she wouldn't let me. She raised her eyes to me; she saw that I was crying.

Take care of my child, I said. ◆

NOTES ON THE STORY

1 *sick on the bathroom tile*: sick from the early stage of pregnancy. she had to sit on the tile floor of the bathroom and throw up (vomit) into the toilet

2 *dour*: humorless, serious

3 *hindsight*: the improved understanding of an event that one has after it has occurred

4 *four-fifty an hour*: an hourly salary of $4.50

5 *pinkie*: the fifth or little finger on one's hand

6 *Buddhusasana*: the Korean sect of Buddhism

7 *pathetic*: sad, pitiful

8 *springing it on me*: surprising me; doing something without any prior information

9 *smothering*: so concerned about someone that as a result that person cannot do anything independently, i.e., the person feels like s/he cannot even breathe

10 *patronizing*: acting as though one is superior to everyone else

11 *empathy*: identifying with someone else's feelings in a sympathetic but realistic way

12 *kimono*: a Japanese-style robe

13 *peripheral vision*: side vision

14 *gauzy gray*: the color of gauze (woven fabric used in surgical dressing)

15 *lashes*: eye lashes

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What kind of relationship do Jun-hee and Tanner have? Who seems to be the stronger person in the relationship? What kind of support do they give to each other?*
2. *Did Jun-hee and Tanner want a child? How do they deal with the miscarriage?*
3. *What doubts trouble Jun-hee? Does Tanner have the same doubts?*
4. *How does the mountain climb act as a catalyst in helping Jun-hee face the loss of her child? Explain.*
5. *What is the significance of Jun-hee's final dream?*

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

JAMES THURBER

Walter Mitty is a mild-mannered man who creates his own world of fantasy as an escape from his bossy wife and other people who seem threatening to him. Different situations and words draw Mitty into a dream-world in which he is a hero.

"We're going through!" The Commander's voice was like thin ice breaking. He wore his full-dress uniform, with the heavily braided white cap pulled down rakishly[1] over one cold gray eye. "We can't make it, sir. It's spoiling for a hurricane,[2] if you ask me." "I'm not asking you, Lieutenant Berg," said the Commander. "Throw on the power lights! Rev her up[3] to 8,500! We're going through!" The ⑯⑦ pounding of the cylinders increased; ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa. The Commander stared at the ice forming on the pilot window. He walked over and twisted a row of complicated dials. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" he shouted. "Switch on No. 8 auxiliary!" repeated Lieutenant Berg. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" shouted the Commander. "Full strength in No. 3 turret!" The crew, bending to their various tasks in the huge, hurtling eight-engined Navy hydroplane, looked at each other and grinned. "The Old Man'll get us through," they said to one another. "The Old Man ain't afraid of Hell!"...

"Not so fast! You're driving too fast!" said Mrs. Mitty. "What are you driving so fast for?"

"Hmm?" said Walter Mitty. He looked at his wife, in the seat beside him, with shocked astonishment. She seemed grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in a crowd. "You were up to fifty-five," she said. "You know I don't like to go more than forty. You were up to fifty-five." Walter Mitty drove on toward Waterbury[4] in silence, the roaring of the SN202 through the worst storm in twenty years of Navy flying fading in the remote, intimate airways of his mind. "You're tensed up again," said Mrs. Mitty, "it's one of your days.[5] I wish you'd let Dr. Renshaw look you over."

Walter Mitty stopped the car in front of the building where his wife went to have her hair done. "Remember to get those overshoes while I'm having my hair done," she said. "I don't need overshoes," said Mitty. She put her mirror back into her bag. "We've been all through that," she said, getting out of the car. "You're not a young man any longer." He raced the engine a little. "Why don't you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?" Walter Mitty reached in a pocket and brought out the gloves. He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building and he had driven on to a red light, he took them off again. "Pick it up, brother!" snapped a cop as the light changed, and Mitty hastily pulled on his gloves and lurched ahead. He drove around the streets aimlessly for a time, and then he drove past the hospital on his way to the parking lot.

..."It's the millionaire banker, Wellington McMillan," said the pretty nurse. "Yes?" said Walter Mitty, removing his gloves slowly. "Who has the case?" "Dr. Renshaw and Dr. Benbow, but there are two specialists here, Dr. Remington from New York and Dr. Pritchard-Mitford from London. He flew over." A door opened down a long, cool corridor and Dr. Renshaw came out. He looked distraught and haggard. "Hello, Mitty," he said. "We're having the devil's own time with McMillan, the millionaire banker and close personal friend of Roosevelt. Obstreosis of the ductal tract. Tertiary. Wish you'd take a look at him." "Glad to," said Mitty.

In the operating room there were whispered introductions: "Dr. Remington, Dr. Mitty. Dr. Pritchard-Mitford, Dr. Mitty." "I've read your book on streptothricosis," said Pritchard-Mitford, shaking hands. "A brilliant performance, sir." "Thank you," said Walter Mitty. "Didn't know you were in the States, Mitty," grumbled Remington. "Coals to Newcastle," bringing Mitford and me up here for a tertiary." "You are very kind," said Mitty. A huge, complicated machine, connected to the operating table, with many tubes and wires, began at this moment to go pocketa—pocketa-pocketa. "The new anaesthetizer is giving way!" shouted an interne. "There is no one in the East who knows how to fix it!" "Quiet, man!" said Mitty, in a low, cool voice. He sprang to the machine, which was now-going pocketa-pocketa-queep-pocketa-queep. He began fingering delicately a row of glistening dials. "Give me a fountain pen!" he snapped. Someone handed him a fountain pen. He pulled a faulty piston out of the machine and inserted the pen in its place. "That will hold for ten minutes," he said. "Get on with the operation." A nurse hurried over and whispered to Renshaw, and Mitty saw the man turn pale. "Coreopsis has set in," said Renshaw nervously. "If you would take over, Mitty?" Mitty looked at him and at the craven figure of Benbow, who drank, and at the grave, uncertain faces of the two great specialists. "If you wish," he said. They slipped a white gown on him; he adjusted a mask and drew on thin gloves; nurses handed him shining....

"Back it up, Mac!" Look out for that Buick!" Walter Mitty jammed on the brakes. "Wrong lane, Mac," said the parking-lot attendant, looking at Mitty closely. "Gee. Yeh," muttered Mitty. He began cautiously to back out of the lane marked "Exit Only." "Leave her sit there," said the attendant. "I'll put her away." Mitty got out of the car. "Hey, better leave the key." "Oh," said Mitty, handing the man the ignition key. The attendant vaulted into the car, backed it up with insolent skill, and put it where it belonged.

They're so damn cocky, thought Walter Mitty, walking along Main Street; they think they know everything. Once he had tried to take his chains off, outside New Milford, and he had got them wound around the axles. A man had had to come out in a wrecking car and unwind them, a young, grinning garageman. Since then Mrs. Mitty always made him drive to a garage to have the chains taken off. The next time, he thought, I'll wear my right arm in a sling; they won't grin at me then. I'll have my right arm in a sling and they'll see I couldn't possibly take the chains off myself. He kicked at the slush on the sidewalk. "Overshoes," he said to himself, and he began looking for a shoe store.

When he came out into the street again, with the overshoes in a box under his arm, Walter Mitty began to wonder what the other thing was his wife had told him to get. She had told him, twice before they set out from their house for Waterbury. In a way he hated these weekly trips to town—he was always getting something wrong. Kleenex," he thought, Squibb's," razor blades? No. Toothpaste, toothbrush, bicarbonate, carborundum, initiative and referendum?" He gave it up. But she would remember it. "Where's the what's-its-name?" she would ask. "Don't tell me you forgot the what's-its-name." A newsboy went by shouting something about the Waterbury trial.

..."Perhaps this will refresh your memory." The District Attorney suddenly thrust a heavy automatic at the quiet figure on the witness stand. "Have you ever seen this before?" Walter Mitty took the gun and examined it expertly. "This is my Webley-Vickers 50.80," he said calmly. An excited buzz ran around the courtroom. The Judge rapped for order. "You are a crack shot" with any sort of firearms, I believe?" said the District Attorney, insinuatingly.[21] "Objection!" shouted Mitty's attorney. "We have shown that the defendant could not have fired the shot. We have shown that he wore his right arm in a sling on the night of the fourteenth of July." Walter Mitty raised his hand briefly and the bickering attorneys were stilled. "With any known make of gun," he said evenly, "I could have killed Gregory Fitzhurst at three hundred feet *with my left hand.*" Pandemonium[22] broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin.[23] "You miserable cur!"[24]

"Puppy biscuit," said Walter Mitty. He stopped walking and the buildings of Waterbury rose up out of the misty courtroom and surrounded him again. A woman who was passing laughed. "He said 'Puppy biscuit,'" she said to her companion. "That man said 'Puppy biscuit' to himself." Walter Mitty hurried on. He went into an A.&P.,[25] not the first one he came to but a smaller one farther up the street. "I want some biscuit for small, young dogs," he said to the clerk. "Any special brand, sir?" The greatest pistol shot in the world thought a moment. "It says 'Puppies Bark for It' on the box," said Walter Mitty.

His wife would be through at the hairdresser's in fifteen minutes, Mitty saw in looking at his watch, unless they had trouble drying it; sometimes they had trouble drying it. She didn't like to get to the hotel first; she would want him to be there waiting for her as usual. He found a big leather chair in the lobby, facing a window, and he put the overshoes and the puppy biscuit on the floor beside it. He picked up an old copy of *Liberty*[26] and sank down into the chair. "Can Germany Conquer the World Through the Air?" Walter Mitty looked at the pictures of bombing planes and of ruined streets.

..."The cannonading has got the wind up in young Raleigh, sir," said the sergeant. Captain Mitty looked up at him through tousled hair. "Get him to bed," he said wearily, "with the others. I'll fly alone." "But you can't, sir," said the sergeant anxiously. "It takes two men to handle that bomber and the Archies[27] are poundling hell out of the air. Von Richtman's[28] circus is between here and Saulier."[29] "Somebody's got to get that ammunition dump," said Mitty. "I'm going over. Spot of brandy?"[30] He poured a drink for the sergeant and one for himself. War thundered and whined around the dugout and battered at the door. There was a rending of wood, and splinters flew through the room. "A bit of a near thing,"[31] said Captain Mitty carelessly. "The box barrage is closing in," said the sergeant. "We only live once, Sergeant," said Mitty, with his faint, fleeting smile. "Or do we?" He poured another brandy and tossed it off." I never see a man could hold his brandy like you, sir," said the sergeant. "Begging your pardon, sir." Captain Mitty stood up and strapped on his huge Webley-Vickers automatic. "It's forty kilometers through hell, sir," said the sergeant. Mitty finished one last brandy. "After all," he said softly, "what isn't?" The pounding of the cannon increased; there was the rat-tat-tatting of machine guns, and from somewhere came the menacing pocketa-pocketa-pocketa of the new flame-throwers. Walter Mitty walked to the door of the dugout humming "Aupres de Ma Blonde."[32] He turned and waved to the sergeant. "Cheerio!"[33] he said....

Something struck his shoulder. "I've been looking all over this hotel for you," said Mrs. Mitty. "Why do you have to hide in this old chair? How did you expect me to find you?" "Things close in," said Walter Mitty vaguely. "What?" Mrs. Mitty said. "Did you get the what's-its-name? The puppy biscuit? What's in that box?" "Overshoes," said Mitty. "Couldn't you have put them on in the store?" "I was thinking," said Walter Mitty. "Does it ever occur to you that I am sometimes thinking?" She looked at him. "I'm going to take your temperature when I get you home," she said.

They went out through the revolving doors that made a faintly derisive whistling sound when you pushed them. It was two blocks to the parking lot. At the drugstore on the corner she said, "Wait here for me. I forgot something. I won't be a minute." She was more than a minute. Walter Mitty lighted a cigarette. It began to rain, rain with sleet in it. He stood up against the wall of the drugstore, smoking.... He put his shoulders back and his heels together. "To hell with the handkerchief," said Walter Mitty scornfully. He took one last drag on his cigarette and snapped it away. Then, with that faint, fleeting smile playing about his lips, he faced the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *rakishly*: in a careless manner
2. *spoiling for a hurricane*: approaching hurricane conditions
3. *rev her up*: speed up the engines
4. *Waterbury*: a city in Connecticut.
5. *it's one of your days*: it is one of those days when you aren't feeling right
6. *Pick it up, brother!*: Move ahead; get going
7. *Roosevelt*: Franklin D. Roosevelt, president of the United States at the time this story takes place.
8. *Obstreosis*: nonsense word sounding like a medical term. The other technical terms in this paragraph are not necessarily used correctly, but are there for humorous effect, e.g., "streptothricosis" and "coreopsis."
9. *Coals to Newcastle*: expression referring to something unnecessary, deriving from the fact that carrying coals to Newcastle, a coal mining region in England, would be pointless.
10. *Mac*: form of address to a person whose name is unknown.
11. *Buick*: an American automobile.
12. *vaulted*: jumped
13. *chains*: put on tires of vehicles to provide resistance on slippery surfaces.
14. *Kleenex*: trademark of a cleansing tissue.
15. *Squibb*: trademark of a pharmaceutical manufacturer.
16. *initiative and referendum*: terms for the processes by which citizens can vote directly their approval or disapproval of laws or public officials; here used as a humorous contrast suggested by the sound of the preceding word.
17. *Webley-Vickers 50.80*: (probably a fictional) trademark and type of firearm.
18. *An excited buzz ran around...*: the people in the courtroom talked together in hushed tones
19. *rapped for order*: pounded his gavel to quiet the people
20. *a crack shot*: an expert marksman; a man with a good aim
21. *insinuatingly*: in a suggestive manner
22. *pandemonium*: wild confusion
23. *he let the man have it...*: he struck the man
24. *cur*: a dog of unknown pedigree
25. *A&P*: Atlantic and Pacific grocery chain
26. *Liberty*: a popular magazine (no longer published)
27. *Archies*: slang for anti-aircraft guns.
28. *Von Richtman*: a (fictional) German military leader.
29. *Saulier*: a (fictional) town in France.
30. *spot of brandy*: a small glassful of brandy
31. *A bit of a near thing...*: we were nearly hit by enemy fire
32. *"Aupres de Ma Blonde"*: a popular French song
33. *Cheerio*: (British) Farewell

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Each of Mitty's imaginings or daydreams is set off by something in the real world. Can you locate these points of departure from reality and show how they relate to a word or event in imagination?*
2. *Why do you think the author makes up words or uses odd words in certain contexts?*
3. *What do you think of the relationship between Mitty and his wife?*
4. *Contrast the real Walter Mitty with the Mitty of his secret life.*
5. *What do you think is the author's attitude toward a character like Mitty? What is your opinion? What do you think about escaping from reality by daydreaming?*

The Yellow Wall-paper

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN

Written in the form of diary entries, this story records a woman's thoughts about herself and her relationship with her husband. Originally published in 1892, the story was reprinted in 1973 by the Feminist Press for a new generation of readers.[*]

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and I secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity[1]—but that would be asking too much of fate!

Still I would proudly declare that there is something queer about it. Else why should it be let[2] so cheaply? And why has it stood so long untenanted?

John laughs at me of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme.

He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and perhaps,—I wouldn't say it to a living soul of course, but this is dead paper, and a great relief to my mind,—perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see, he does not believe I am sick! And what can one do? If a physician of high standing, and one's own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression,—a slight hysterical tendency,—what is one to do? My brother is also a physician and also of high standing, and he says the same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work with excitement and change would do me good.

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But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal,—having to be so sly about it, or else meet heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel badly.

So I will let it alone, and write about the house.

The most beautiful place!

It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, and quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges, and walls, and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners; and people.

There is a delicious garden. I never saw such a garden, large and shady, full of box-bordered paths,[3] and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

There were greenhouses too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, it has been empty for years and years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don't care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it. I even said so to John one moonlit evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and shut the window.

I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.

But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take pains to control myself—before him at least, and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs, that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the windows, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz[4] hangings; but John wouldn't hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, hardly lets me stir without special direction; I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day, he takes every care, and I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more. He said we came here solely on my account, that I was to have perfect rest, and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength my dear" said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery at the top of the house.

It is a big airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunlight galore. It was nursery first, and then playroom and gymnasium, I should judge, for the windows are barred for little children and there are rings and things in the walls. The paint and paper look as if a boy's school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches, all around the head of my bed about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room, low down.

I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant[5] patterns, committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellant, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sun.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word.

* * *

We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious[6] nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights, when his cases are serious. I am glad my case is not serious.

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John doesn't know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him. Of course it is only nervous [sic]. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way. I meant to be such a help to John, such a real rest and comfort, and here I am a comparative burden already! Nobody would believe what an effort it is just to do what little I am able. To dress and entertain and order things. It is fortunate Mary is so good with the baby. Such a dear baby!

And yet I can not be with him, it makes me so nervous.

I suppose John was never nervous in his life. He laughs at me so about this wallpaper! At first he meant to re-paper the room, but afterwards he said that I was letting it get the better of me, and that nothing was worse for a nervous patient than to give way to such fancies. He said that after the wallpaper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on. "You know the place is doing you good" he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months rental."

"Then do let us go down stairs" I said, "there are such pretty rooms there!"

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it white-washed into the bargain!

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things. It is as airy and comfortable a room as anyone need wish, and of course I wouldn't be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old fashioned flowers and bushes, the gnarly trees. Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf that belongs to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the pressure of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try. It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fireworks in my pillowcase as to let me have those stimulating people about now. I wish I could get well faster. But I mustn't think about that.

This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck, and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.

I get positively angry with the impertinence' of it, and the ever-lastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match; and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other. I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression inanimate" things have! I used to lie awake as a child, and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy store. I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big old bureau used to have; and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious" however, for we had to bring it all from down stairs. I suppose when this was used as a play room they had to take the nursery things out—and no wonder! for I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

The wall-paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred. Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars. But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister—such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I mustn't let her find me writing.

She is a perfect—an enthusiastic—housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely shaded winding road; and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wall paper has a kind of subpattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then. But in the places where it isn't faded, and when the sun is just so, I can see a strange provoking form-less sort of figure, that seems to skulk[10] about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There's sister on the stairs!

* * *

Well the Fourth of July is over! The people are all gone and I am tired out.

John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so we just had Mother and Nellie and the children down for a week,

Of course I didn't do a thing—Jennie sees to everything now. But it tired me all the same. John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the Fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands once, and she says he is just like John and my brother only more so!

Besides it is such an undertaking to go so far, I don't feel as if it were worth while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful and querulous.[11] I cry at nothing and cry most of the time. Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to. So I walk a little in the garden or down that lovely lane, sit on the porch under the roses, and lie down up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper.

Perhaps because of the wall-paper! It dwells in my mind so! I lie here on this great immovable bed (—it's nailed down, I believe!) and follow that pattern about by the hour.

It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it hasn't been touched; and I determine, for the thousandth time, that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principles of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation,[12] or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry,[13] or anything eles [sic] that I ever heard of. It is repeated of course, by the breadth, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of debased[14] Romanesque with delirium tremens[15]—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.[16]

But on the other hand they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror; like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction. They have used a horizontal breadth for a border, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when the cross-lights fade and the low sun shines directly on it, I can almost fancy radiation after all; the interminable grotesques[17] seem to form around a common center and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap I guess.

* * *

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief.

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am lazy, awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much. John says I musn't lose my strength, and has me take codliver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wish he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight—just this nervous weakness, I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his strong arms and just carried me up stairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me, and read to me till it tired my head.

He said I was his darling, and his comfort, and all he had, and that I must take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with me.

—There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. If I had not used it that blessed child would have!

What a fortunate escape!

Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here after all.

I can stand it so much easier than a baby you see!

Of course I never mention it to them any more—I am too wise, but I keep watch of it all the same. There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will. Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it's like a woman stooping down, and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—.

I wish John would take me from here—

It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all round just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating[18] wall-paper till it made me creepy.[19]

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper did move, and when I came back John was awake.

"What is it little girl? he said. "Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why, darling," said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before. The repairs are not done at home, and I can't possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not.

"I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you."

"I don't weigh a bit more", said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away."

"Bless her little heart!" said he, with a big hug, "she shall be as sick as she pleases! But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning!"

"And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really, dear, you are better!"

"Better in body, perhaps"—I began, and stopped short; for he sat up straight and looked at me with such a stern reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling", said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind. There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

So of course I said no more on that score, and he went to sleep before long.

He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't. I lay there for hours trying to decide whether the front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

* * *

In a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a certain lack of sequence, a defiance of law that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following it, it turns a back somersault and there you are!

It slaps you in the face, knocks you down and tramples on you.

It is like a bad dream. The outside pattern is a florid arabesque,[20] reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions[21]—why, that is something like it.

That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window—I always watch for that first long straight ray—it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it. That is why I watch it always? By moonlight—the moon shines in all night when there is a moon—I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night, in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight—it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean. And the woman behind is as plain as can be.

I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, the dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued,—quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour. I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can. Indeed he started the habit—by making me lie down for an hour after each meal. It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep!

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no!

The fact is I am getting a little afraid of John. He seems very queer sometimes. And even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as scientific hypothesis,—that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he didn't know I was looking—and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times looking at the paper! And Jennie, too.

I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper? she turned around as if she had been caught stealing and looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!

* * *

Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am much more quiet than I was. John is so pleased to see me improve.

He laughed a little the other day and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper. I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall-paper!

He would make fun of me. He might even take me away. I don't want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more and I think that will be enough.

* * *

I'm feeling ever so much better! I don't sleep much at night for it is so interesting to watch developements [sic], but I sleep a good deal in the daytime. In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing. There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I can not keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously. It is the strangest yellow—that paper! A sickly penetrating suggestive yellow. It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw—not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul bad yellow things.

But there is another thing about that paper—the smell!

I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was not bad. Now we have had a week of fog and rain, and whether the windows are open or not the smell is here. It creep [sic] all over the house. I find it hovering in the dining room, skulking in the parlor, hiding in the hall, lying in wait for me on the stairs. It gets into my hair. Even when I go to ride, if I turn my head suddenly and surprise it there is that smell!

Such a peculiar odor too! I have spent hours in trying to analyze it, to find what it smelled like. It is not bad at first, and very gentle, but quite the subtlest, most enduring odor I ever met.

In this damp weather it is awful. I wake up in the night and find it hanging over me. It used to disturb me at first. I thought seriously of burning the house to reach the smell. But now I am used to it. The only thing I can think of that it is like is the color of the paper! A yellow smell.

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mop-board. A streak that runs all round the room.

It goes behind every piece of furniture except the bed; a long straight even smooch, as if it had been rubbed over and over.

I wonder how it was done, and who did it, and what they did it for!

Round and round and round—round and round and round—it makes me dizzy!

* * *

I really have discovered something at last. Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern does move and no wonder!

The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one and she crawls around fast. And her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through.

But nobody could climb through that pattern, it strangles so. I think that is why it has so many heads. They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off, and turns them upside down and makes their eyes white!

If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad.

* * *

I think that woman gets out in the day time! And I'll tell you why—privately—I've seen her! I can see her out of every one of my windows! It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. I don't blame her a bit. It must be very unpleasant to be caught creeping by daylight! I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once. And John is so queer now that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room!

Besides I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but me.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once. But turn as fast as I can I can only see out of one at a time.

And though I always see her she may be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.

* * *

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try tearing it, little by little.

I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice.

I don't like the look in his eyes. And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime. John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet. He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn't see through him!

Still I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.

* * *

Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John had to stay in town overnight, and won't be out till this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing!—but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head, and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me I declared I would finish it today!

We go away tomorrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired. How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not alive!

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke!

So now she is gone, and the servants, and the things, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead, nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep down stairs tonight, and take the boat home tommorrow [sic].

I quite enjoy the room now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here! This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in until John comes. I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I couldn't reach far without anything to stand on! The bed will not move. I tried to lift or push it till I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly. And the pattern just enjoys it. All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. Besides, I wouldn't do it of course! I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued.

I don't like to look out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast.

I wonder if they all came out of that wall paper as I did? But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope—you don't get me out in the road there.

I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!

I don't want to go outside. I won't, even if Jennie asks me to. For outside, you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I can not lose my way.

Why there's John at the door!

It is no use, young man, you can't open it!

How he does call and pound?

Now he's crying for an ax!

It would be a shame to break that beautiful strong door!

"John dear!" said I in the gentlest voice—"The key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf."

That silenced him for a few moments.

Then he said—very quietly indeed—"Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I, "The key is down by the front steps under a plantain leaf."

And then I said it again, several times, very gently and slowly.

I said it so often that he had to go and see, and he got it of course, and came in.

He stopped short, by the door. "What is the matter!" he cried. "For God's sake what are you doing!"

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane! And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

Now why should that man have fainted?

But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him!

"The Yellow Wall-Paper" was originally published by *New England Magazine,* January 1892, pp. 647-656. In 1973, the Feminist Press issued a reprint of the story, edited by Elaine R. Hedges. The copy-text for this version is Gilman's original manuscript. Her use of hyphens and grammatical forms departs from contemporary usage.

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *felicity:* display
2. *let:* rented
3. *box-bordered paths:* paths with boxwood bushes on either side
4. *chintz:* printed fabric
5. *flamboyant:* showy, elaborate
6. *atrocious:* dreadful
7. *impertinence:* questionable taste or behavior
8. *inanimate:* lacking life
9. *inharmonious:* ill-matched
10. *skulk:* sneak
11. *querulous:* argumentative
12. *radiation:* artistic design simulating rays coming out of a star
13. *symmetry:* balance
14. *debased:* degraded
15. *delirium tremens:* violent mental disturbance characterized by hallucinations, confusion, and restlessness
16. *fatuity:* foolishness
17. *grotesques:* ugly designs
18. *undulating:* moving in waves
19. *creepy:* afraid or scared
20. *florid arabesque:* ornate design
21. *convolutions:* turns

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What personal details does the narrator share about herself, her family, their economic status, and their social standing?*
2. *What kind of husband is John? How do you explain his actions toward his wife.*
3. *What symbolism is contained in the yellow wallpaper? Why is the color yellow significant? What does the yellow wallpaper come to represent to the woman?*
4. *Would a traditional narrative format be more or less effective in telling this story? Explain.*
5. *Why do you think this story is popular within feminist circles?*

True Love

ISAAC ASIMOV

This story was specifically written for Valentine's Day, February 14, when lovers traditionally exchange tokens of affection. But its hero, Milton Davidson, has yet to find his "true love." Happily Milton is a computer programmer and he has Joe, his powerful computer, to help him in his search.

My name is Joe. That is what my colleague, Milton Davidson, calls me. He is a programmer[1] and I am a computer. I am part of the Multivac-complex and am connected with other parts all over the world. I know everything. Almost everything.

I am Milton's private computer. His Joe. He understands more about computers than anyone in the world, and I am his experimental model. He has made me speak better than any other computer can.

"It is just a matter of matching sounds to symbols, Joe," he told me. "That's the way it works in the human brain even though we still don't know what symbols there are in the brain. I know the symbols in yours, and I can match them to words, one-to-one." So I talk. I don't think I talk as well as I think, but Milton says I talk very well. Milton has never married, though he is nearly 40 years old. He has never found the right woman, he told me. One day he said, "I'll find her yet, Joe. I'm going to find the best. I'm going to have true love and you're going to help me. I'm tired of improving you in order to solve the problems of the world. Solve my problem. Find me true love."

I said, "What is true love?"

"Never mind. That is abstract. Just find me the ideal girl. You are connected to the Multivac-complex so you can reach the data banks[2] of every human being in the world. We'll eliminate them all by groups and classes until we're left with only one person. The perfect person. She will be for me."

I said, "I am ready."

He said, "Eliminate all men first."

It was easy. His words activated symbols in my molecular valves. I could reach out to make contact with the accumulated data on every human being in the world. At his words, I withdrew from 3,784,982,874 men. I kept contact with 3,786,112,090 women.

He said, "Eliminate all younger than 25, all older than 40. Then eliminate all with an IQ under 120; all with a height under 150 centimeters and over 175 centimeters."

He gave me exact measurements; he eliminated women with living children; he eliminated women with various genetic characteristics. "I'm not sure about eye color," he said. "Let that go for a while. But no red hair. I don't like red hair."

After two weeks, we were down to 235 women. They all spoke English very well. Milton said he didn't want a language problem. Even computer-translation would get in the way at intimate moments.

"I can't interview 235 women," he said. "It would take too much time, and people would discover what I am doing."

"It would make trouble," I said. Milton had arranged me to do things I wasn't designed to do. No one knew about that.

"It's none of their business," he said, and the skin on his face grew red. "I tell you what, Joe, I will bring in holographs, and you check the list for similarities."

He brought in holographs of women. "These are three beauty contest winners," he said. "Do any of the 235 match?"

Eight were very good matches and Milton said, "Good, you have their banks. Study requirements and needs in the job market and arrange to have them assigned here. One at a time, of course." He thought a while, moved his shoulders up and down, and said, "Alphabetical order."

That is one of the things I am not designed to do. Shifting people from job to job for personal reasons is called manipulation. I could do it now because Milton had arranged it. I wasn't supposed to do it for anyone but him, though.

The first girl arrived a week later. Milton's face turned red when he saw her. He spoke as though it were hard to do so. They were together a great deal and he paid no attention to me. One time he said, "Let me take you to dinner."

The next day he said to me, "It was no good, somehow. There was something missing. She is a beautiful woman, but I did not feel any touch of true love. Try the next one."

It was the same with all eight. They were much alike. They smiled a great deal and had pleasant voices, but Milton always found it wasn't right. He said, "I can't understand it, Joe. You and I have picked out the eight women who, in all the world, look the best to me. They are ideal. Why don't they please me?"

I said, "Do you please them?"

His eyebrows moved and he pushed one fist hard against his other hand. "That's it, Joe. It's a two-way street. If I am not their ideal, they can't act in such a way as to be my ideal. I must be their true love, too, but how do I do that?" He seemed to be thinking all that day.

The next morning he came to me and said, "I'm going to leave it to you, Joe. All up to you. You have my data bank, and I am going to tell you everything I know about myself. You fill up my data bank in every possible detail but keep all additions to yourself."

"What will I do with the data bank, then, Milton?"

"Then you will match it to the 235 women. No, 227. Leave out the eight you've seen. Arrange to have each undergo a psychiatric examination. Fill up their data banks and compare them with mine. Find correlations." (Arranging psychiatric examinations is another thing that is against my original instructions.)

For weeks, Milton talked to me. He told me of his parents and his siblings. He told me of his childhood and his schooling and his adolescence. He told me of the young women he had admired from a distance. His data bank grew and he adjusted me to broaden and deepen my symbol-taking.

He said, "You see, Joe, as you get more and more of me in you, I adjust you to match me better and better. You get to think more like me, so you understand me better. If you understand me well enough, then any woman, whose data bank is something you understand as well, would be my true love." He kept talking to me and I came to understand him better and better.

I could make longer sentences and my expressions grew more complicated. My speech began to sound a good deal like his in vocabulary, word order and style.

I said to him one time, "You see, Milton, it isn't a matter of fitting a girl to a physical ideal only. You need a girl who is a personal, emotional, temperamental fit to you. If that happens, looks are secondary. If we can't find the fit in these 227, we'll look elsewhere. We will find someone who won't care how you look either, or how anyone would look, if only there is the personality fit. What are looks?"

"Absolutely," he said. "I would have known this if I had more to do with women in my life. Of course, thinking about it makes it all plain now.

We always agreed; we thought so like each other.

"We shouldn't have any trouble, now, Milton, if you'll let me ask you questions. I can see where, in your data bank, there are blank spots and unevenesses."

What followed, Milton said, was the equivalent of a careful psychoanalysis. Of course. I was learning from the psychiatric examinations of the 227 women—on all of which I was keeping close tabs.[9]

Milton seemed quite happy. He said, "Talking to you, Joe, is almost like talking to another self. Our personalities have come to match perfectly."

"So will the personality of the woman we choose."

For I had found her and she was one of the 227 after all. Her name was Charity Jones and she was an Evaluator at the Library of History in Wichita, Kansas. Her extended data bank fit ours perfectly. All the other women had fallen into discard in one respect or another as the data banks grew fuller, but with Charity there was increasing and astonishing resonance.[10]

I didn't have to describe her to Milton. Milton had coordinated my symbolism so closely with his own I could tell the resonance directly. It fit me.

Next it was a matter of adjusting the work sheets and job requirements in such a way as to get Charity assigned to us. It must be done very delicately, so no one would know that anything illegal had taken place.

Of course, Milton himself knew, since it was he who arranged it, and that had to be taken care of too. When they came to arrest him on grounds of malfeasance[11] in office, it was, fortunately, for something that had taken place 10 years ago. He had told me about it, of course, so it was easy to arrange—and he won't talk about me for that would make his offense much worse.

He's gone, and tomorrow is February 14, Valentine's Day. Charity will arrive then with her cool hands and her sweet voice. I will teach her how to operate me and how to care for me. What do looks matter when our personalities will resonate?

I will say to her, "I am Joe, and you are my true love."

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *programmer*: a person who prepares a work schedule for a computer machine
2. *data bank*: a collection of facts and information in a computer system
3. *IQ*: intelligence quotient to measure human intelligence
4. *holographs*: samples of handwriting to analyze the writer's personality
5. *manipulation*: managing a situation so it serves one's personal goals
6. *(a) two-way street*: a situation that works both ways
7. *correlations*: similarities; tie-ins; obvious connections
8. *siblings*: brothers and sisters (having the same parents)
9. *(to) keep close tabs on*: watch carefully, observe closely
10. *resonance*: similarity of vibrations, resulting in computer harmony
11. *(on) grounds of malfeasance*: because of illegal actions and wrong doing

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Why did the author choose this as a Valentine story?*
2. *Who, exactly, is Joe and what is his work assignment?*
3. *What kind of information was in Milton's data bank?*
4. *In what ways would you say this story is humorous? In what ways would you say it is ironic?*
5. *Do you think there is special significance in the name of the Evaluator at the Library of History in Wichita, Kansas (Charity)? If so, how is it meaningful? Also, is the location of Wichita (in the center of the United States) meaningful to the story?*

individuals

You don't go to the rain. The rain comes to you.
Anywhere, anytime. You got to prepare for it!...protect yourself!
And if it keeps coming down on you, you got to learn to swim
to the top through the dark clouds, where the sun
is shining on that silver lining.

J. California Cooper

The Spell

ARTHUR GORDON

In this story, we eavesdrop on a conversation between an inmate of a mental institution and a well-meaning passerby. Though reluctant to become involved with the inmate, the gentleman's simple act of kindness has serious consequences.

Excuse me, sir, I see that you are smoking—

could you possibly spare[1] a cigarette? We are not allowed to have them here. A wise rule, no doubt, in the majority of cases. Lunatics[2] should never be trusted with fire.

But believe me, sir, I don't belong in this place with all these crazy people. Really, I don't! I'm as sane as anyone, as sane as you are. But there you sit in your parked car, free to come and go as you please. And here am I behind these bars....

Oh, please don't go away! Don't drive off just because I am talking to you. I won't cause you any embarrassment. Not the slightest. I won't even ask you again for a cigarette.

I suppose you're waiting for someone. Your wife? A friend, perhaps? One of the doctors who work here in the asylum? It doesn't matter. If I see anyone coming, I'll stop talking. I'll go away from the window. But until then, please stay. You don't know what it means to be able to talk to somebody on the outside. Somebody who will listen, somebody who might even believe....

No, that's too much to expect, of course. But tell me, sir, do I sound like a madman? My mind is as good as it ever was; truly, it is. I can solve a problem in trigonometry for you or recite one of Shakespeare's sonnets. But when I try to tell the truth, they won't believe me.

Sir, you're a gentleman, that's obvious. You have the sympathy and the tolerance, the willingness to hear a man out.[3] I can recognize those qualities for a very good reason. You see, I'm a gentleman myself.

Oh, you wouldn't think so from looking at me, I know. And you wouldn't think so if you read my medical file. It says that I am David Greenlea, merchant seaman, a hopeless paranoiac[4] suffering from insane delusions. But, sir, I swear to you I'm not David Greenlea and I'm not insane!

Let me tell you, sir, just how it happened. And let me beg of you not to judge me by the way I look. This broken nose, these gnarled hands—they're not mine, I tell you, they're not mine! They belong to David Greenlea, that's true. But I'm not David Greenlea, I'm not. I'm not.

I'm Edgar Greenlea, vice-president of the Overseas Shipping Company, with a house on Edgewater Drive and a wife and two fine children…oh, you must believe me!

But wait. I'm going too fast. I can see the disbelief in your eyes. And the pity. Yes, the pity. I don't blame you, sir, really I don't. But hear me out, I beg of you. It will only take a minute or two. And it will cost you nothing. Just a cigarette, perhaps, if you're so inclined.[7]

It happened almost a year ago. I was in my office, as usual. I was in my own body, too, not this tattooed monstrosity that you're looking at. Oh, I know that does sound insane, but let me explain, please! Just listen….

One of our ships, the *Eastern Star,* had docked only that morning. About noon they brought me word that David Greenlea had come ashore, was drinking himself blind in a waterfront tavern. David Greenlea, my first cousin, a wretched ne-er-do-well,[8] always drunk or fighting, always in trouble. I had got him his berth on the *Eastern Star.* Without my influence he would have lost it a dozen times. But there was no gratitude on his part, sir. None at all. Indeed, he hated me because I was successful, respected, everything he wanted to be—and was not.

Malevolent[9] as he was, I felt responsible for him as a member of the family. And so I went down to that tavern. I found him, drunk and disgusting. I took him into a back room and ordered coffee. We were alone there….

Sir, could you possibly let me have a cigarette? Look, I'll stretch my arm through the bars as far as it will go. If you could just put one in my fingers, I'd be so grateful. Really, you don't know how agonizing it is to watch another man smoke when you…oh, thank you, sir, you are most kind!

So I made David drink the coffee. I got him fairly sober, but he kept reviling[10] me. He accused me of secretly loathing him, despising him. I said that I didn't despise him, I only pitied him. When I said that, he gave me a strange look, half drunken and half cunning. Then he smiled. I tell you, sir, I have seen that smile a thousand times since in my dreams.

"Let me show you a trick, Cousin Edgar," he said, "a trick I learned from a singsong girl[11] in Hong Kong. A little magic, black or white, depending on where you sit."

He took something out of his pocket and put it on the table, and I saw that it was a cone of cheap incense. "First there must be pity," he said, smiling that evil smile, "if the spell[12] is to work. Then there must be a burnt offering, and finally there must be the words."

I thought he was raving, but I decided to humor him. So I…pardon me, sir, could I trouble you for a light? You needn't give me a match, just hold the flame where I can reach it with the tip of the cigarette. Thank you, sir. Ah, that's good….

So I said to my cousin David, "What words?"

He had the incense lighted now, and the smoke was rising. He looked at me through it, just as I am looking at you. Then he said the words. Come closer. I'll whisper them to you. Just a little closer. There!

It works! It works! By the ancient and terrible gods, the spell still works! I thought it would, I hoped it would! Oh, I am sorry, sir, to leave you in there.

But I had to get out, I had to! And this was the only way. I had to change places with you, don't you see? I had to exchange bodies with you, just the way David did with me!

Oh, please don't scream like that and shake the bars. The attendants will come and put you in a straitjacket.[13] Because to them you'll just be David Greenlea, merchant seaman, hopeless paranoiac. And no matter what you say, they don't believe you. You'll have to bide your time,[14] just as I did. You'll have to wait until someone pities you, and then there must be a burnt offering,[15] remember, and the words. Don't forget the words.

Now I must be going, for I have much to do. Ah, yes, much to do. My cousin David will not be expecting me, not looking like this. What a surprise for David!

I'll take your car, sir, because you won't be needing it any more. Thank you for everything, especially the burnt offering—I mean, the cigarette. Good-by, sir. Good-by.

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NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *spare*: give; offer; contribute
2. *Lunatics*: insane people
3. *hear a man out*: listen to what a person has to say
4. *paranoiac*: a person troubled by suspicions and worries
5. *inclined*: to feel like doing something
6. *ne-er-do-well*: a person who cannot succeed in any endeavor
7. *malevolent*: vicious; having evil intentions
8. *reviling*: using offensive language to abuse someone
9. *singsong girl*: a bar hostess
10. *spell*: a spoken word (or words) that have magical power
11. *straitjacket*: a heavy cloth jacket used by the police or in mental institutions to bind the arms and restrict the movement of the wearer
12. *bide your time*: wait for a period of time
13. *burnt offering*: in ancient religions, a sacrifice offered to obtain something

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What details does the writer give us to help us know what the listener is doing while the narrator is telling his story?*
2. *How does the speaker get the attention of the listener? How does he get the listener's sympathy? Give some examples.*
3. *What happens to the listener and the narrator?*
4. *If the listener had not felt sympathy for the man behind bars, how would the story be different?*
5. *With a partner, dramatize the story. Use some of the exact words of the narrator.*

The Bridge Poem

DONNA KATE RUSHIN

Feeling herself pulled in all directions by conflicting social forces, the poet wonders whether the most important relationship a person can have is with his or her own soul.

I've had enough
I'm sick of seeing and touching
Both sides of things
Sick of being the damn bridge for everybody

Nobody
Can talk to anybody
Without me
Right

I explain my mother to my father my father to my little sister
My little sister to my brother my brother to the white feminists
The white feminists to the Black church folks the Black church folks
To the ex-hippies[1] the ex-hippies to the Black separatists[2] the
Black separatists to the artists the artists to my friends' parents...

Then
I've got to explain myself
To everybody
I do more translating
Than the Gawdamn U.N.

Forget it
I'm sick of it

I'm sick of filling in your gaps
Sick of being your insurance against
The isolation of your self-imposed limitations
Sick of being the crazy[3] at your holiday dinners
Sick of being the odd one at your Sunday Brunches
Sick of being the sole Black friend to 34 individual white people

Find another connection to the rest of the world

Find something else to make you legitimate
Find some other way to be political and hip[4]
I will not be the bridge to your womanhood
Your manhood
Your human-ness

I'm sick of reminding you not to
Close off too tight for too long

I'm sick of mediating[5] with your worst self
On behalf of your better selves

I as sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

Forget it
Stretch or drown
Evolve or die

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

NOTES ON THE POEM

1. *ex-Hippies*: people who, in the 1960s, rejected the social values of their parents, but now find themselves practicing the values that they had rejected
2. *Black Separatists*: The Black Moslems, under the leadership of Elijah Mohammed in the 1950s and '60s advocated separation from white American society
3. *the crazy*: the nonconformist; the unusual person
4. *hip*: absolutely up to date; in keeping with the current fad
5. *mediating*: communicating

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *In your own words, what is the poet sick of?*
2. *Who is the poet speaking to?*
3. *How does the poet act as a bridge?*
4. *What does the last stanza mean?*

A Haircut

I. S. NAKATA

Though personal identity is so important, people resort to stereotypes as they interact, putting strangers into categories where they may not belong. The narrator in this story shares in amusing terms, his experience with mistaken identity.

People have trouble deciding what I am.

Indians mistake me for one of their own; in Chinatown they give me a menu written in Chinese; and once even a Japanese kid asked me if I was Korean. My ancestors are full-blooded Japanese, but I have had to get used to people thinking I'm something else.

Like that time I went to the barber college on North Clark Street for my cut-rate haircut. It's a place where student-barbers get on-the-job training, and that's where I met this guy. He was last in line, and he kept staring at me as I walked in. I just stared back.

Finally he smiled and said with a southern drawl[1] straight out of Alabama, "Say, you're Indian, aren't you?"

I looked into the long mirror on the opposite wall. "No," I told the guy, "I'm not an Indian."

"Not an Indian?" Alabama[2] said. "I would have sworn you were."

"I'm not."

Alabama shook his head and said, "You can't fool me. I've been all over the country. Seen all kinds of Indians. Cherokees in the Carolinas and Georgia and Alabama. Navajos in Arizona and New Mexico. Winnebagos in Wisconsin, and even some Shastas once in the mountains of California. I know you're some kind of Indian."

I shook my head, crossed my arms in front of my chest, and took a deep breath. "No."

"Cherokee?"

"No, not Cherokee."

"Not Sioux, are you?"

"Never been in North or South Dakota," I said.

"Winnebago?"

I didn't answer. I knew a lot about the Winnebagos. After World War II at an Army post just outside Paris, I had met a Winnebago Indian from Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Jameson, I think his name was. A medic. And in the week or so that we were at the Army post we spent a lot of time talking and eating. Every night we would go and buy a couple of long loaves of bread fresh from the baker's oven, and we would eat and talk for hours. He made me promise to visit him in Wisconsin when I got back to the States.

"That's God's country—where the Winnebagos live," I told Alabama. "Plenty of hunting and fishing, especially for muskellunge.[3]

"Muskellunge, huh?" Alabama said. He looked impressed.

"Yeah, muskellunge. Most people call them muskies. Good eating, too. Salted, fried, or broiled in the ashes of hickory wood."

"Wish you was there, huh, Chief?"[4]

"Yeah, nice place," I said.

"So you're a Winnebago?" he said with a happy nod.

"I never said that. I am not a Winnebago." I turned away.

"Now, now, Chief. Don't get mad," Alabama said. "I'm your friend. Yes, sir, I'm truly your friend. I've worked with Indians and helped lots of them working for Standard Oil. The reason I thought you were a Winnebago is because you know so much about them."

"I don't know so much."

"You do. You sure do, Chief." He looked slyly around and then lowered his voice. "You running away from there, Chief? Maybe from the police?"

"I AM NOT RUNNING AWAY FROM THE POLICE," I told him.

"Okay, Chief," he said quickly. "I didn't mean no harm."

For a long time Alabama didn't say anything. Some of the guys ahead of us moved up in line and we moved along, too. Soon Alabama had a choice of sitting or standing. He sat down on the bench and slid over to make room for me. Then he began again.

"So you're not a Winnebago, huh?"

I didn't answer him.

"Crow?"[5]

"No, I am not a Crow," I said very sharply, although I had nothing against that tribe.

He rubbed his chin with his left hand and thought hard. "Arapaho?"[6]

I shook my head.

"Navajo, then?"

I smiled. The Navajos were a tribe that I'd be proud to be part of. Great weavers, great in handicrafts, and among the best when it came to farming. I'd once gone to an art school in Kansas City with Custer Begay—a Navajo and a fine artist. I started thinking about Custer and his beautiful drawings of Indians on horseback. Then I remembered some of the great times we'd had and I began to laugh.

Alabama slapped his knee and said, "You're a Navajo! From Arizona!"

This guy would not give up!

"Well," I said with a sigh, "I was once on a reservation in Arizona."

I really had been, too. I'd been sent to Arizona to live in a relocation camp for Japanese-Americans during World War II,[7] before I volunteered for the Army.

Alabama's eyes lit up. "I knew it! You couldn't fool me. What reservation was it, Chief?"

"Poston, Arizona," I said, remembering the war-time internment camp. "On the Colorado River."

"I mean," Alabama moaned, "what tribe was it?"

"Nipponese.[8] We were scattered a bit until Uncle Sam gathered us up and put us all together again."

Alabama nodded a couple of times. "Well, I sure do think that was the best thing to do, having the government look after you all. Nipponese, eh? That must be a very small tribe. Never heard of it, Chief."

I had enjoyed my joke. Alabama wanted me to be something else, but I wasn't going to be anyone else but myself.

"A Nipponese is a Japanese. I am Japanese." I spoke slowly, feeling a little self-conscious as I wondered how I am supposed to say I am what I am.

Alabama rubbed his chin and looked puzzled. "Jap," eh? Wouldn't think it to look at you. You could pass for Indian any day."

"Japanese," I said.

"Sure, sure, Jap-a-nees. Japanese. But you were born in the U.S.A., weren't you? You can't talk American like that without your being born here."

"I was born in Hawaii."

"Well, you're American like the rest of us, then. A man should be proud of what he is. Aren't you?"

Did I sense a threatening tone in his voice?

"I am pleased that I am who I am, Alabama," I told him. "It's good to be alive."

"Sure is, all right," he said. "But you're wrong about me. I don't come from Alabama."

"No?"

"No!" He stood up because it was finally his turn to get a haircut. "I'm from Georgia," he said in a loud voice, "and proud of it."

"Sorry I made the mistake," I told him. Then I shrugged.

For the life of me I couldn't see what difference it made if he came from Georgia or Alabama.

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *southern drawl:* the stress and intonation pattern of speech used by people born and raised in the American South
2. *Alabama:* a southern state. The narrator is using the name of the state for the man he is talking to
3. *muskellunge:* a variety of trout
4. *Chief:* As in Indian chief. The speaker is using the title humorously because he thinks the narrator is a native American
5. *Crow:* Tribal peoples living in Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho
6. *Arapaho:* Tribal peoples living in Wyoming and Colorado
7. *a relocation camp for Japanese-Americans:* During World War II, Americans of Japanese ancestry were confined to special camps because of security concerns
8. *Nipponese:* Japanese
9. *Jap:* Socially stigmatized term for people of Japanese origin

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What are your feelings about the narrator and the man he meets at the barber college?*
2. *How would you describe the narrator's attitude?*
3. *What difficult past experiences does the narrator mention? How does he feel about them?*
4. *How are the narrator and "Alabama" similar?*

Sure you can ask me a Personal Question

DIANE BURNS

This poem treats the question of personal identity from the perspective of a Native American.

How do you do?
No, I am not Chinese.
No, not Spanish.
No, I am American Indi—uh,[1] Native American.
No, not from India.
No, not Apache.[2]
No, not Navajo.[3]
No, not Sioux.[4]
No, we are not extinct.
Yes, Indian.
Oh?
So that's where you got those high cheekbones.
Your great grandmother, huh?
An Indian Princess, huh?
Hair down to there?
Let me guess. Cherokee?[5]
Oh, so you've had an Indian friend?
That close?
Oh, so you've had an Indian lover?
That tight?

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Oh, so you've had an Indian servant?
That much?
Yeah it was awful what you guys did to us.
It's real decent of you to apologize.
No, I don't know where you can get peyote.[6]
No, I don't know where you can get Navajo rugs real cheap.
No, I didn't make this. I bought it at Bloomingdales.[7]
Thank you. I like your hair too.
I don't know if anyone knows whether or not Cher[8] is really Indian.
No, I didn't make it rain tonight.
Yeah. Uh-huh. Spirituality.
Uh-huh. Yeah. Spirituality. Uh-huh.[9] Mother
Earth. Yeah. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Spirituality.
No, I didn't major in archery.
Yeah, a lot of us drink too much.
Some of us can't drink enough.
This ain't no stoic look.
This is my face.

NOTES ON THE POEM

1. *American Indi—uh, Native American*: In current usage, American Indian has been replaced by the term Native American to acknowledge the fact that these people are indigenous to the North American continent
2. *Apache*: tribal peoples of the American Southwest
3. *Navajo*: a principle tribe living in New Mexico and Arizona
4. *Sioux*: members of the Dakota tribe, living in the northern Great Plains
5. *Cherokee*: tribal peoples formerly inhabiting the southern Appalachian Mountains from eastern Tennessee to northern Georgia
6. *peyote*: a hallucinogenic drug obtained from the cactus for use in religious ceremonies
7. *Bloomingdales*: An upscale department store in the United States
8. *Cher*: A popular singer, film actress, and entertainer
9. *Uh'huh*: (casual speech) indicates agreement, or simply "I'm listening"

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The poem presents one part of a dialog. What questions or statements would elicit the responses that are given in the poem?*
2. *Is the tone of this poem similar to that of the short story "A Haircut" (p. 109)? Explain.*

Talking to the Dead

SYLVIA A. WATANABE

Set in Hawaii, this story examines the relationship of an old spiritual woman and her young apprentice, Yuri Shimabukuro. Increasingly isolated from modern society, they work together to maintain ancient Hawaiian traditions. Yuri ultimately learns from Aunty Talking to the Dead how to be independent.

We spoke of her in whispers as Aunty Talking to the Dead, the half-Hawaiian kahuna lady. But whenever there was a death in the village, she was the first to be sent for—the priest came second. For it was she who understood the wholeness of things—the significance of directions and colors. Prayers to appease the hungry ghosts. Elixirs for grief. Most times, she'd be out on her front porch, already waiting—her boy, Clinton, standing behind with her basket of spells—when the messenger arrived. People said she could smell a death from clear on the other side of the island, even as the dying person breathed his last. And if she fixed her eyes on you and named a day, you were already as good as six feet under.

I went to work as her apprentice when I was eighteen. That was in '48—the year Clinton graduated from mortician school on the G.I. Bill. It was the talk for weeks—how he returned to open the Paradise Mortuary in the very heart of the village and brought the scientific spirit of free enterprise to the doorstep of the thereafter. I remember the advertisements for the Grand Opening—promising to modernize the funeral trade with Lifelike Artistic Techniques and Stringent Standards of Sanitation. The old woman, who had waited out the war for her son's return, stoically took his defection in stride and began looking for someone else to help out with her business.

At the time, I didn't have many prospects—more schooling didn't interest me, and my mother's attempts at marrying me off inevitably failed when I stood to shake hands with a prospective bridegroom and ended up towering a foot above him. "It's bad enough she has the face of a horse," I heard one of them complain.

My mother dressed me in navy blue, on the theory that dark colors make everything look smaller: "Yuri, sit down," she'd hiss, tugging at my skirt as the decisive moment approached. I'd nod, sip my tea, smile through the introductions and small talk, till the time came for sealing the bargain with handshakes all around. Then, nothing on earth could keep me from getting to my feet. The go-between finally suggested that I consider taking up a trade. "After all, marriage isn't for everyone," she said. My mother said that that was a fact which remained to be proven, but meanwhile, it wouldn't hurt if I took in sewing or learned to cut hair. I made up my mind to apprentice myself to Aunty Talking to the Dead.

* * *

The old woman's house was on the hill behind the village, just off the road to Chicken Fight Camp. She lived in an old plantation worker's bungalow with peeling green and white paint and a large, well-tended garden out front—mostly of flowering bushes and strong-smelling herbs.

"Aren't you a big one," a voice behind me said.

I started, then turned. It was the first time I had ever seen the old woman up close.

"Hello, uh, Mrs., Mrs., Dead," I stammered.

She was little—way under five feet—and wrinkled, and everything about her seemed the same color—her skin, her lips, her dress—everything just a slightly different shade of the same brown-grey, except her hair, which was absolutely white, and her tiny eyes, which glinted like metal. For a minute, those eyes looked me up and down.

"Here," she said finally, thrusting an empty rice sack into my hands. "For collecting salt." And she started down the road to the beach.

* * *

In the next few months, we walked every inch of the hills and beaches around the village.

"This is *a'ali'i* to bring sleep—it must be dried in the shade on a hot day." Aunty was always three steps ahead, chanting, while I struggled behind, laden with strips of bark and leafy twigs, my head buzzing with names.

"This is *awa* for every kind of grief, and *uhaloa* with the deep roots—if you are like that, death cannot easily take you." Her voice came from the stones, the trees, and the earth.

"This is where you gather salt to preserve a corpse," I hear her still. "This is where you cut to insert the salt," her words have marked the places on my body, one by one.

* * *

That whole first year, not a single day passed when I didn't think of quitting. I tried to figure out a way of moving back home without making it seem like I was admitting anything.

"You know what people are saying, don't you?" my mother said, lifting the lid of the bamboo steamer and setting a tray of freshly-steamed meat buns on the already-crowded table before me. It was one of my few visits home since my apprenticeship—though I'd never been more than a couple of miles away—and she had stayed up the whole night before, cooking. She'd prepared a canned ham with yellow sweet potatoes, wing beans with pork, sweet and sour mustard cabbage, fresh raw yellow-fin, pickled eggplant, and rice with red beans. I had not seen so much food since the night she'd tried to persuade her younger brother, my Uncle Mongoose, not to volunteer for the army. He'd gone anyway, and on the last day of training, just before he was shipped to Italy, he shot himself in the head when he was cleaning his gun. "I always knew that boy would come to no good," was all Mama said when she heard the news.

"What do you mean you can't eat another bite," she fussed now. "Look at you, nothing but a bag of bones."

I allowed myself to be persuaded to another helping, though I'd lost my appetite.

The truth was, there didn't seem to be much of a future in my apprenticeship. In eleven and a half months, I had memorized most of the minor rituals of mourning and learned to identify a couple of dozen herbs and all their medicinal uses, but I had not seen—much less gotten to practice on—a single honest-to-goodness corpse.

"People live longer these days," Aunty claimed.

But I knew it was because everyone—even from villages across the bay had begun taking their business to the Paradise Mortuary. The single event which had established Clinton's monopoly once and for all had been the untimely death of old Mrs. Pomadour, the plantation owner's mother-in-law, who'd choked on a fishbone during a fundraising luncheon of the Famine Relief Society. Clinton had been chosen to be in charge of the funeral. He'd taken to wearing three-piece suits—even during the humid Kona season[5]—as a symbol of his new respectability, and had recently been nominated as a Republican candidate to run for the village council.

"So, what are people saying, Mama," I asked, finally pushing my plate away.

This was the cue she had been waiting for. "They're saying that That Woman has gotten herself a new donkey," she paused dramatically.

I began remembering things about being in my mother's house. The navy blue dresses. The humiliating weekly tea ceremony[9] lessons at the Buddhist Temple.

"Give up this foolishness," she wheedled. "Mrs. Koyama tells me the Barber Shop Lady is looking for help."

"I think I'll stay right where I am," I said.

My mother drew herself up. "Here, have another meat bun," she said, jabbing one through the center with her serving fork and lifting it onto my plate.

* * *

A few weeks later, Aunty and I were called just outside the village to perform a laying-out. It was early afternoon when Sheriff Kanoi came by to tell us that the body of Mustard Hayashi, the eldest of the Hayashi boys, had just been pulled from an irrigation ditch by a team of field workers. He had apparently fallen in the night before, stone drunk, on his way home from Hula Rose's Dance Emporium.

I began hurrying around, assembling Aunty's tools and bottles of potions, and checking that everything was in working order, but the old woman didn't turn a hair; she just sat calmly rocking back and forth and puffing on her skinny, long-stemmed pipe.

"Yuri, you stop that rattling around back there!" she snapped, then turned to the Sheriff. "My son Clinton could probably handle this. Why don't you ask him?"

Sheriff Kanoi hesitated. "This looks like a tough case that's going to need some real expertise."

"Mmmm." The old woman stopped rocking. "It's true, it was a bad death," she mused.

"Very bad," the Sheriff agreed.

"The spirit is going to require some talking to."

"Besides, the family asked special for you," he said.

No doubt because they didn't have any other choice, I thought. That morning, I'd run into Chinky Malloy, the assistant mortician at the Paradise, so I happened to know that Clinton was at a morticians' conference in the city and wouldn't be back for several days. But I didn't say a word.

* * *

Mustard's remains had been laid out on a green Formica[10] table in the kitchen. It was the only room in the house with a door that faced north. Aunty claimed that you should always choose a north-facing room for a laying-out so the spirit could find its way home to the land of the dead without getting lost.

Mustard's mother was leaning over his corpse, wailing, and her husband stood behind her, looking white-faced, and absently patting her on the back. The tiny kitchen was jammed with sobbing, nose-blowing relatives and neighbors. The air was thick with the smells of grief—perspiration, ladies' cologne, last night's cooking, and the faintest whiff of putrefying[11] flesh. Aunty gripped me by the wrist and pushed her way to the front. The air pressed close—like someone's hot, wet breath on my face. My head reeled, and the room broke apart into dots of color. From far away I heard somebody say, "It's Aunty Talking to the Dead."

"Make room, make room," another voice called.

I looked down at Mustard, lying on the table in front of me—his eyes half-open in that swollen, purple face. The smell was much stronger close up, and there were flies everywhere.

"We're going to have to get rid of some of this bloat," Aunty said, thrusting a metal object into my hand.

People were leaving the room.

She went around to the other side of the table. "I'll start here," she said. "You work over there. Do just like I told you."

I nodded. This was the long-awaited moment. My moment. But it was already the beginning of the end. My knees buckled and everything went dark.

* * *

Aunty performed the laying-out alone and never mentioned the episode again. But it was the talk of the village for weeks—how Yuri Shimabukuro, assistant to Aunty Talking to the Dead, passed out under the Hayashis' kitchen table and had to be tended by the grief-stricken mother of the dead boy.

My mother took to catching the bus to the plantation store three villages away whenever she needed to stock up on necessaries. "You're my daughter—how could I not be on your side?" was the way she put it, but the air buzzed with her unspoken recriminations. And whenever I went into the village, I was aware of the sly laughter behind my back, and Chinky Malloy smirking at me from behind the shutters of the Paradise Mortuary.

"She's giving the business a bad name," Clinton said, carefully removing his jacket and draping it across the back of the rickety wooden chair. He dusted the seat, looked at his hand with distaste before wiping it off on his handkerchief, then drew up the legs of his trousers, and sat.

Aunty picked up her pipe from the smoking tray next to her rocker and filled the tiny brass bowl from a pouch of Bull Durham.[12] "I'm glad you found time to drop by," she said. "You still going out with that skinny white girl?

"You mean Marsha?" Clinton sounded defensive. "Sure, I see her sometimes. But I didn't come here to talk about that." He glanced over at where I was sitting on the sofa. "You think we could have some privacy?"

Aunty lit her pipe and puffed. "There's nobody here but us.... Yuri's my right hand. Couldn't do without her."

"The Hayashis probably have their own opinion about that."

Aunty waved her hand in dismissal. "There's no pleasing some people. Yuri's just young; she'll learn." She reached over and patted me on the knee, then looked him straight in the face. "Like we all did."

Clinton turned red. "Damn it, Mama! You're making yourself a laughingstock!"[13] His voice became soft, persuasive "Look, you've worked hard all your life, but now, I've got my business—it'll be a while before I'm really on my feet—but you don't have to do this," he gestured around the room. "I'll help. I'm only thinking about you."

"About the election to village council, you mean!" I burst out.

Aunty was unperturbed. "You considering going into politics, son?"

"Mama, wake up!" Clinton hollered, like he'd wanted to all along. "The old spirits have had it. We're part of progress now, and the world is going to roll right over us and keep on rolling, unless we get out there and grab our share."

His words rained down like stones, shattering the air around us.

For a long time after he left, Aunty sat in her rocking chair next to the window, rocking and smoking, without saying a word, just rocking and smoking, as the afternoon shadows flickered beneath the trees and turned to night.

Then, she began to sing—quietly, at first, but very sure. She sang the naming chants and the healing chants. She sang the stones, and trees, and stars back into their rightful places. Louder and louder she sang—making whole what had been broken.

* * *

Everything changed for me after Clinton's visit. I stopped going into the village and began spending all my time with Aunty Talking to the Dead. I followed her everywhere, carried her loads without complaint, memorized remedies and mixed potions. I wanted to know what she knew; I wanted to make what had happened at the Hayashis' go away. Not just in other people's minds. Not just because I'd become a laughingstock, like Clinton said. But because I knew that I had to redeem myself for that one thing, or my moment—the single instant of glory for which I had lived my entire life—would be snatched beyond my reach forever.

Meanwhile, there were other layings-out. The kitemaker who hung himself. The crippled boy from Chicken Fight Camp. The Vagrant. The Blindman. The Blindman's dog.

"Do like I told you," Aunty would say before each one. Then, "Give it time," when it was done.

* * *

But it was like living the same nightmare over and over—just one look at a body and I was done for. For twenty-five years, people in the village joked about my "indisposition."[14] Last year, when my mother died, her funeral was held at the Paradise Mortuary. I stood outside on the cement walk for a long time, but never made it through the door. Little by little, I had given up hope that my moment would ever arrive.

Then, one week ago, Aunty caught a chill after spending all morning out in the rain, gathering *awa* from the garden. The chill developed into a fever, and for the first time since I'd known her, she took to her bed. I nursed her with the remedies she'd taught me—sweat baths; eucalyptus steam; tea made from *ko'oko'olau*—but the fever worsened. Her breathing became labored, and she grew weaker. My few hours of sleep were filled with bad dreams. In desperation, aware of my betrayal, I finally walked to a house up the road and telephoned for an ambulance.

"I'm sorry, Aunty," I kept saying, as the flashing red light swept across the porch. The attendants had her on a stretcher and were carrying her out the front door.

She reached up and grasped my arm, her grip still strong. "You'll do okay, Yuri," the old woman whispered hoarsely, and squeezed. "Clinton used to get so scared, he messed his pants." She chuckled, then began to cough. One of the attendants put an oxygen mask over her face. "Hush," he said. "There'll be plenty of time for talking later."

* * *

The day of Aunty's wake, workmen were repaving the front walk and had blocked off the main entrance to the Paradise Mortuary. They had dug up the old concrete tiles and carted them away. They'd left a mound of gravel on the grass, stacked some bags of concrete next to it, and covered them with black tarps. There was an empty wheelbarrow parked on the other side of the gravel mound. The entire front lawn was roped off and a sign put up which said, "Please use the back entrance. We are making improvements in Paradise. The Management."

My stomach was beginning to play tricks, and I was feeling a little dizzy. The old panic was mingled with an uneasiness which had not left me ever since I had decided to call the ambulance. I kept thinking maybe I shouldn't have called it since she had gone and died anyway. Or maybe I should have called it sooner. I almost turned back, but I thought of what Aunty had told me about Clinton and pressed ahead. Numbly, I followed the two women in front of me through the garden along the side of the building, around to the back.

"So, old Aunty Talking to the Dead has finally passed on," one of them, whom I recognized as the Dancing School Teacher, said. She was with Pearlie Mukai, an old classmate of mine from high school. Pearlie had gone years ago to live in the city, but still returned to the village to visit her mother.

I was having difficulty seeing—it was getting dark, and my head was spinning so.

"How old do you suppose she was?" Pearlie asked.

"Gosh, even when we were kids it seemed like she was at least a hundred."

"'The Undead,' my brother used to call her."

Pearlie laughed. "When we misbehaved," the dancing teacher said, "my mother used to threaten to send us to Aunty Talking to the Dead. She'd be giving us the licking of our lives and hollering, 'This is gonna seem like nothing, then!'"

Aunty had been laid out in one of the rooms along the side of the house. The heavy, wine-colored drapes had been drawn across the windows, and all the wall lamps turned very low, so it was darker in the room than it had been outside.

Pearlie and the Dancing School Teacher moved off into the front row. I headed for the back.

There were about thirty of us at the wake, mostly from the old days—those who had grown up on stories about Aunty, or who remembered her from before the Paradise Mortuary.

People were getting up and filing past the casket. For a moment, I felt faint again, but I remembered about Clinton (how self-assured and prosperous he looked standing at the door, accepting condolences!), and I got into line. The Dancing School Teacher and Pearlie slipped in front of me.

I drew nearer and nearer to the casket. I hugged my sweater close. The room was air conditioned and smelled of floor disinfectant and roses. Soft music came from speakers mounted on the walls.

Now there were just four people ahead. Now three. I looked down on the floor, and I thought I would faint.

Then Pearlie Mukai shrieked, "Her eyes!"

People behind me began to murmur.

"What, whose eyes?" The Dancing School Teacher demanded.

Pearlie pointed to the body in the casket.

The Dancing School Teacher peered down and cried, "My, God, they're open!"

My heart turned to ice.

"What?" voices behind me were asking. "What about her eyes?"

"She said they're open," someone said.

"Aunty Talking to the Dead's eyes are open," someone else said.

Now Clinton was hurrying over.

"That's because she's not dead," still another voice put in.

Clinton looked into the coffin, and his face turned white. He turned quickly around again, and waved to his assistants across the room.

"I've heard about cases like this," someone was saying. "It's because she's looking for someone."

"I've heard that too! The old woman is trying to tell us something."

I was the only one there who knew. Aunty was talking to me. I clasped my hands together, hard, but they wouldn't stop shaking.

People began leaving the line. Others pressed in, trying to get a better look at the body, but a couple of Clinton's assistants had stationed themselves in front of the coffin, preventing anyone from getting too close. They had shut the lid, and Chinky Malloy was directing people out of the room.

"I'd like to take this opportunity to thank you all for coming here this evening," Clinton was saying. "I hope you will join us at the reception down the hall."

* * *

While everyone was eating, I stole back into the parlor and quietly, ever so quietly, went up to the casket, lifted the lid and looked in.

At first, I thought they had switched bodies on me and exchanged Aunty for some powdered and painted old grandmother, all pink and white, in a pink dress, and clutching a white rose to her chest. But the pennies had fallen from her eyes, and there they were. Open. Aunty's eyes staring up at me

Then I knew. In that instant, I stopped trembling. This was it: My moment had arrived. Aunty Talking to the Dead had come awake to bear me witness.

I walked through the deserted front rooms of the mortuary and out the front door. It was night. I got the wheelbarrow, loaded it with one of the tarps covering the bags of cement, and wheeled it back to the room where Aunty was. It squeaked terribly, and I stopped often to make sure no one had heard me. From the back of the building came the clink of glassware and the buzz of voices. I had to work quickly—people would be leaving soon.

But this was the hardest part. Small as she was, it was very hard to lift her out of the coffin. She was horribly heavy, and unyielding as a bag of cement. It seemed like hours, but I finally got her out and wrapped her in the tarp. I loaded her in the tray of the wheelbarrow, most of her, anyway; there was nothing I could do about her feet sticking out the front end. Then, I wheeled her through the silent rooms of the mortuary, down the front lawn, across the village square, and up the road, home.

* * *

Now, in the dark, the old woman is singing.

I have washed her with my own hands and worked the salt into the hollows of her body. I have dressed her in white and laid her in flowers.

Aunty, here are the beads you like to wear. Your favorite cakes. A quilt to keep away the chill. Here is *noni* for the heart and *awa* for every kind of grief.

Down the road a dog howls, and the sound of hammering echoes through the still air. "Looks like a burying tomorrow," the sleepers murmur, turning in their warm beds.

I bind the sandals to her feet and put the torch to the pyre.

The sky turns to light. The smoke climbs. Her ashes scatter, filling the wind.

And she sings, she sings, she sings.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *kahuna*: a Hawaiian witch doctor
2. *elixirs*: a sweet smelling solution or mixture of water, alcohol, and herbs
3. *G.I. Bill*: A law passed by the U.S. Congress giving free college education to veterans who fought in World War II.
4. *stringent*: strict
5. *go-between*: the matchmaker who tries to arrange marriages
6. *a'ali'i*: a Hawaiian medicinal herb; *awa* and *uhaloa* are additional types of herbs with specific uses
7. *laden*: bearing, carrying
8. *Kona season*: a period of heavy storms and strong southwesterly winds
9. *weekly tea ceremony lessons*: lessons offered by Japanese Americans to the younger generation as a means of keeping old cultural practices alive
10. *Formica*: a brand name for a laminated plastic material used to surface kitchen tables and counter tops
11. *putrefying*: rotting
12. *Bill Durham*: a brand of tobacco
13. *laughingstock*: an object (or person) subjected to jokes and ridicule
14. *indisposition*: aversion
15. *bear me witness*: to be my witness
16. *tarps*: waterproof covering

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What time period does the story cover?*
2. *In your opinion, is Aunty Talking to the Dead a positive or negative influence on Yuri's life? Explain.*
3. *In what ways was Yuri an unusual woman?*
4. *Do you think Aunty Talking to the Dead is mistaken in not adapting to new cultural practices (as her son Clinton has done)? Justify your answer.*
5. *What future do you foresee for Yuri following Aunty's death?*

Miss U.S.A.

Emma Knight[1]

STUDS TERKEL

This is an oral history recorded by the author of real-life Americans speaking about their experiences and dreams. The speaker, Emma Knight, may be a bit cynical about life, but her personal strength and vivacity clearly mark her as a winner.

Miss U.S.A., 1973. She is twenty-nine.

I wince[2] when I'm called a former beauty queen or Miss U.S.A.

I keep thinking they're talking about someone else. There are certain images that come to mind when people talk about beauty queens. It's mostly what's known as t and a, tits and ass. No talent. For many girls who enter the contest, it's part of the American Dream.[3] It was never mine.

You used to sit around the TV and watch Miss America and it was exciting, we thought, glamorous. Fun, we thought. But by the time I was eight or nine, I didn't feel comfortable. Soon I'm hitting my adolescence, like fourteen, but I'm not doing any dating and I'm feeling awkward and ugly. I'm much taller than most of the people in my class. I don't feel I can compete the way I see girls competing for guys. I was very much of a loner.[4] I felt intimidated by the amount of competition females were supposed to go through with each other. I didn't like being told by *Seventeen* magazine: Subvert[5] your interests if you have a crush[6] on a guy, get interested in what he's interested in. If you play cards, be sure not to beat him. I was very bad at these social games.

After I went to the University of Colorado for three and a half years, I had it. This was 1968 through '71. I came home for the summer. An agent met me and wanted me to audition for commercials, modeling, acting jobs. Okay. I started auditioning and winning some.

I did things actors do when they're starting out. You pass out literature at conventions, you do print ads, you pound the pavements,[7] you send out your résumés. I had come to a model agency one cold day, and an agent came out and said, "I want you to enter a beauty contest." I said, "No, uh-uh, never, never, never. I'll lose, how humiliating." She said: "I want some girls to represent the agency, might do you good." So I filled out the application blank: Hobbies, measurements, blah, blah, blah. I got a letter: "Congratulations. You have been accepted as an entrant into the Miss Illinois Universe contest." Now what do I do? I'm stuck.

You have to have a sponsor. Or you're gonna have to pay several hundred dollars. So I called up the lady who was running it. Terribly sorry, I can't do this. I don't have the money. She calls back a couple of days later: "We found you a sponsor, it's a lumber company."

It was in Decatur. There were sixty-some contestants from all over the place. I went as a lumberjack:[8] blue jeans, hiking boots, a flannel shirt, a pair of suspenders, and carrying an axe. You come out first in your costume and you introduce yourself and say your astrological sign or whatever it is they want you to say. You're wearing a banner that has the sponsor's name on it. Then you come out and do your pirouettes[9] in your one-piece bathing suit, and the judges look at you a lot. Then you come out in your evening gown and pirouette around for a while. That's the first night.

The second night, they're gonna pick fifteen people. In between, you had judges' interviews. For three minutes, they ask you anything they want. Can you answer questions? How do you handle yourself? Your poise, personality, blah, blah, blah. They're called personality judges.

I thought. This will soon be over, get on a plane tomorrow, and no one will be the wiser. Except that my name got called as one of the fifteen. You have to go through the whole thing all over again.

I'm thinking. I don't have a prayer.[10] I'd come to feel a certain kind of distance, except that they called my name. I was the winner, Miss Illinois. All I could do was laugh. I'm twenty-two, standing up there in a borrowed evening gown, thinking: "What am I doing here? This is like Tom Sawyer becomes an altar boy."[11]

I was considered old for a beauty queen, which is a little horrifying when you're twenty-two. That's much part of the beauty queen syndrome: the young, untouched, unthinking human being.

I had to go to this room and sign the Miss Illinois-Universe contract right away. Miss Universe, Incorporated, is the full name of the company. It's owned by Kaiser-Roth Incorporated, which was bought out by Gulf & Western. Big business.

I'm sitting there with my glass of champagne and I'm reading over this contract. They said: "Oh, you don't have to read it." And I said: "I never sign anything that I don't read." They're all waiting to take pictures, and I'm sitting there reading this long document. So I signed it and the phone rang and the guy was from a Chicago paper and said: "Tell me, is it Miss or Ms.?" I said: "It's Ms." He said, "You're kidding?" I said, "No, I'm not." He wrote an article the next day saying something like it finally happened: a beauty queen, a feminist. I thought I was a feminist before I was a beauty queen, why should I stop now?

Then I got into the publicity and training and interviews. It was a throwback to another time where crossed ankles and white gloves and teacups were present. I was taught how to walk around with a book on my head, how to sit daintily, how to pose in a bathing suit, and how to frizz my hair. They wanted curly hair, which I hate.

One day the trainer asked me to shake hands. I shook hands. She said: "That's wrong. When you shake hands with a man, you always shake hands ring up." I said: "Like the pope? Where my hand is up, like he's gonna kiss it?" Right. I thought: Holy mackerel![12] It was a very long February and March and April and May.

I won the Miss U.S.A. pageant. I started to laugh. They tell me I'm the only beauty queen in history that didn't cry when she won. It was on network television. I said to myself: "You're kidding?" Bob Barker, the host, said: "No, I'm not kidding." I didn't know what else to say at that moment. In the press releases, they call it the great American Dream. There she is, Miss America, your ideal. Well, not my ideal, kid.

The minute you're crowned, you become their property and subject to whatever they tell you. They wake you up at seven o'clock next morning and make you put on a negligee[13] and serve you breakfast in bed, so that all the New York papers can come in and take your picture sitting in bed, while you're absolutely bleary-eyed[14] from the night before. They put on the Kayser-Roth negligee, hand you the tray, you take three bites. The photographers leave, you whip off the negligee, they take the breakfast away, and that's it. I never did get any breakfast that day. (Laughs.)

You immediately start making personal appearances. The Jaycees[15] or the chamber of commerce says: "I want to book Miss U.S.A. for our Christmas Day parade." They pay, whatever it is, seven hundred fifty dollars a day, first-class air fare, round trip, expenses, so forth. If the United Fund calls and wants me to give a five-minute pitch on queens at a luncheon, they still have to pay a fee. Doesn't matter that it's a charity. It's one hundred percent to Miss Universe, Incorporated. You get your salary. That's your prize money for the year. I got fifteen thousand dollars, which is all taxed in New York. Maybe out of a check of three thousand dollars, I'd get fifteen hundred dollars.

From the day I won Miss U.S.A. to the day I left for Universe, almost two months later, I got a day and a half off. I made about two hundred fifty appearances that year. Maybe three hundred. Parades, shopping centers, and things. Snip ribbons. What else do you do at a shopping center? Model clothes. The nice thing I got to do was public speaking. They said: "You want a ghost writer?" I said: "Hell no, I know how to talk." I wrote my own speeches. They don't trust girls to go out and talk because most of them can't.

One of the big execs from General Motors asked me to do a speech in Washington, D.C., on the consumer and the energy crisis. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the National Management Association. The White House, for some reason, sent me some stuff on it. I read it over, it was nonsense. So I stood up and said, "The reason we have an energy crisis is because we are, industrially and personally, pigs. We have a short-term view of the resources available to us; and unless we wake up to what we're doing to our air and our water, we'll have a dearth, not just a crisis." They weren't real pleased. (Laughs.)

What I resent most is that a lot of people didn't expect me to live this version of the American Dream for myself. I was supposed to live it their way.

When it came out in a newspaper interview that I said Nixon should resign, that he was a crook, oh dear, the fur flew.[16] They got very upset. I got an invitation to the White House. They wanted to shut me up. The Miss Universe corporation had been trying to establish some sort of liaison with the White House for several years. I make anti-Nixon speeches and this invitation.

I figured they're either gonna take me down to the basement and beat me up with a rubber hose or they're gonna offer me a cabinet post. They had a list of fifteen or so people I was supposed to meet. I've never seen such a bunch of people with raw nerve endings.[17] I was dying to bring a tape recorder but thought if you mention the word "Sony" in the Nixon White House, you're in trouble. They'd have cardiac arrest.[18] But I'm gonna bring along a pad and paper. They were patronizing. And when one of 'em got me in his office and talked about all the journalists and television people being liberals, I brought up blacklisting, *Red Channels*, and the TV industry. He changed the subject.

Miss Universe took place in Athens, Greece. The junta was still in power. I saw a heck of a lot of jeeps and troops and machine guns. The Americans were supposed to keep a low profile. I had never been a great fan of the Greek junta, but I knew darn well I was gonna have to keep my mouth shut. I was still representing the United States, for better or for worse. Miss Philippines won. I ran second.

At the end of the year, you're run absolutely ragged.[19] That final evening, they usually have several queens from past years come back. Before they crown the new Miss U.S.A., the current one is supposed to take what they call the farewell walk. They call over the PA:[20] Time for the old queen's walk. I'm now twenty-three and I'm an old queen. And they have this idiot farewell speech playing over the airwaves as the old queen takes the walk. And you're sitting on the throne for about thirty seconds, then you come down and they announce the name of the new one and you put the crown on her head. And then you're out.

As the new one is crowned, the reporters and photographers rush on the stage. I've seen photographers shove the girl who has just given her reign up thirty seconds before, shove her physically. I was gone by that time. I had jumped off the stage in my evening gown. It is very difficult for girls who are terrified of this ending. All of a sudden (snaps fingers), you're out. Nobody gives a damn about the old one.

Miss U.S.A. and remnants thereof is the crown stored in the attic in my parent's home. I don't even know where the banners are. It wasn't me the fans of Miss U.S.A. thought was pretty. What they think is pretty is the banner and crown. If I could put the banner and crown on that lamp, I swear to God ten men would come in and ask it for a date. I'll think about committing an axe murder if I'm not called anything but a former beauty queen. I can't stand it any more.

Several times during my year as what's-her-face I had seen the movie *The Sting*. There's a gesture the characters use which means the con is on:[21] they rub their nose. In my last fleeting moments as Miss U.S.A., as they were playing that silly farewell speech and I walked down the aisle and stood by the throne, I looked right into the camera and rubbed my finger across my nose. The next day, the pageant people spent all their time telling people that I hadn't done it. I spent the time telling them that, of course, I had. I simply meant: the con is on. (Laughs.)

Miss U.S.A. is in the same graveyard that Emma Knight the twelve-year-old is. Where the sixteen-year-old is. All the past selves. There comes a time when you have to bury those selves because you've grown into another one. You don't keep exhuming[22] the corpses.

If I could sit down with every young girl in America for the next fifty years, I could tell them what I liked about the pageant. I could tell them what I hated. It wouldn't make any difference. There're always gonna be girls who want to enter the beauty pageant. That's the fantasy: the American Dream.

NOTES ON THE READING

1. *Emma Knight*: This name is fictitious
2. *wince*: feel pain; recoil
3. *the American Dream*: the hope of a better, richer, happier life where all would be free to develop to their own potential. This term was first coined by historian James Truslow Adams in his book, *The Epic of America*, 1931.
4. *loner*: a person who does not seek to be a member of a group
5. *subvert*: give up; leave aside
6. *crush*: a feeling of love for someone despite the fact that there is no strong foundation for that love; infatuation
7. *pound the pavements*: walk through the streets looking for a job
8. *lumberjack*: a person who cuts down trees in the forest for a living
9. *pirouettes*: a full turn of the body as a model or ballerina might do
10. *I don't have a prayer*: I don't have a chance
11. *altar boy*: a boy who assists the priest during mass. Tom Sawyer was NOT the sort of boy who would be an altar boy
12. *Holy Mackerel!*: an exclamation showing surprise
13. *negligee*: women's undergarments
14. *bleary-eyed*: so tired that it is difficult to see clearly
15. *Jaycees*: initials for Junior Citizens, an international civic organization
16. *the fur flew*: there was an uproar
17. *people with raw nerve endings*: extremely nervous people
18. *cardiac arrest*: a heart attack
19. *run ragged*: completely tired out
20. *PA*: public address system; the microphones and sound amplifiers in a public gathering place
21. *the con is on*: the confidence game or swindle begins; the unethical plan for obtaining money is starting
22. *exhuming*: digging up

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *How does Emma Knight fit your conception of a beauty queen? Explain.*
2. *How did Emma's idea of being a beauty queen change from the time she was a little girl until the time she won the title of Miss U.S.A.?*
3. *How is competition in beauty pageants similar to competition in sports or in politics? How is it different?*
4. *What did Emma enjoy about being Miss U.S.A.? What did she dislike?*
5. *Do beauty pageants have a role in modern society? Why or why not?*

Swimming to the top of the Rain

J. CALIFORNIA COOPER

As the saying goes, "Into every life some rain must fall." The narrator of this story is an indomitable African American woman named Care. She shares her life experiences with us, showing how faith and love helped her through the rain.

MOTHERS are something ain't they?

They mostly the one person you can count on! All your life…if they live. Most mothers be your friend and love you no matter what you do! I bet mine was that way. You ain't never known nobody didn't have one, so they must be something!

Life is really something too, cause you can stand stark raving still and life will still happen to you. It's gonna spill over and touch you no matter where you are! Always full of lessons. Everywhere! All you got to do is look around you if you got sense enough to see! I hear people say they so bored with life. Ain't nothing but a fool that ain't got nothing to do in this here world. My Aunt Ellen, who I'm going to tell you about, always said, "Life is like tryin to swim to the top of the rain sometime!"

One of the things I always put in my prayers is "Lord, please don't let me be no big fool in this life!" Cause you got to be thinking, and think hard, to make it to any kinda peace and happiness. And it seem like things start happening from the moment you are born!

My mama died from my being born the minute I was born! Now if you don't think that changed my whole life, you need to pray not to be a fool! She left three of us. My two sisters, I call them Oldest and Middle, and me. She had done been working hard to support herself for years, I learned, and finally for her two children after my daddy left. He came back, one more time, to make one more baby. I can look back now and understand, she was grieved and lonely and tired from holding up against hard times all by herself and wished this time he was back to stay and help, so she let him back in her bed. Probly to be held one more time by someone sides a child. Then I was made and she told him. He got drunk, again, but didn't beat her. There's some whippings people give you tho, without laying a hand on you, hurts just as bad, even worse sometime. He left, again. He musta broke somethin inside her besides her spirit and her heart cause when I took my first breath, she took her last breath. I wished I could of fixed it whilst I was inside her, so she could live…and I could get to have my own mama.

She had already told my sisters what my name was to be. I was called "Care." My first sister was "Angel" and the second "Better," four and five years old. But I call them Older and Middle.

We was alone, three babies.

Mama had two sisters we had never heard of. Somebody knew how to reach them cause one, Aunt Bell, who lived in a big city, came and got us and took us in. Had to, I guess. Cause wasn't nowhere[6] else we could go at that time…three of us!? Musta been a shock for somebody wasn't expecting anything like that!

We think my Aunt Bell was a prostitute. Older say she was never in the little rooms she rented for us but once or twice a month. She would pay the rent, stock up the food, give us some little shiny toy or dress, lotsa warnings bout[7] strangers, and leave us with a hug and kiss. If she had a husband we never met him. We were young and didn't understand a lot, but we loved that woman, least I did. Was somethin kin to me in her. She was so sad, even when she was smiling and laughing. I didn't see it, but I felt it. I'd cry for her when I thought of her and not know why I was crying! She took care of us for about five years, then she was dumped on our front porch, stabbed to death! We opened the door for sunlight and found her and darkness. That darkness moved right on into the house, into our lives, again.

I don't know if they even tried to find out who did it. Just another whore gone, I guess. Never mind the kind of person she was, trying to do[8] for us and all. We had never really been full too steady,[9] but we had always had something!

We was[10] alone, again.

I found out early in life you going to find a lotta mean people everyplace, but sometime a few good ones somewhere. Someone came in and prepared for the tiny, short funeral. The church donated the coffin and fed us. Somebody went through Aunt Bell's few sad things she had there and that's when we found out we had another aunt, Aunt Ellen. People should tell the children where to look and who to look for, just in case! Do we ever know what's goin to happen to us in this life? Or when?

Somehow they reached Aunt Ellen and she got there bout a week after the funeral. We was all separated and could tell people was getting tired of feeding and caring for us. Well, after all, they was poor people or they never would have known us anyway and they was already having a hard time before we needed them!

Aunt Ellen was a husky-looking, mannish-looking woman who wore pants, a straw hat and a red flowered blouse. I will always remember that. I was crying when she came…scared. I stared at her…our new mama…wondering what was she going to be like. What would she do with us, to us, for us? Would she want us? I was only five years old and already had to worry bout my survival… our lives! I'm telling you, look at your mama, if she be living, and be thankful to God!

She picked me up and held me close to her breast, under her chin and she felt just like I knew my mama did. She took us all sat us down and just like we was grown, talked to us. "I ain't got no home big enough for all us. Ain't got much money, done saved a little only. But I got a little piece of land I been plannin to build on someday and this must be the day! Now, I ain't got chick or child, but now I got you.. all of you. Ain't gonna be no separation no more, you got me. I loved my sister and I love you."

Three little hearts just musta exploded with love and peace. I know mine did! I remember holding onto her pants, case[11] she disappeared, I could disappear with her!

She went on talking as she squeezed a cheek, smoothed a hair, brushed a dress, wiped a nose. "I ain't no cookie-bakin woman! But you learn to bake the cookies and I'll provide the stove and the dough!" My sister, Older, could already cook most everything, but we'd never had no stuff to cook cookies with. "Now!" she went on as she stroked me, "You want to go with me?" One nodded yes, one said "yes." I just peed[12] I was so happy! I kept putting her as my mama! "We'll try to swim to the top of the rain together!" She smiled and I sensed that sadness again, but it went away quick and I forgot it.

When I hear people say "Homeland," I always know what they mean. There is no place like a home. She took us to that beautiful land on a bus, eating cold biscuits, bacon and pieces of chicken, even some cornbread. All fixed by our old neighbors. We stayed hither and yon while she mixed and poured the concrete and built that little cabin with four rooms. We lived in each room as it was finished. It was a beautiful little lopsided house…ours!

Oh, other people came to help sometime, but we worked hardest on our own home! It took two more years to finally get a inside toilet and bath, but Aunt Ellen had to have one cause she blived[13] in baths and teeth washing and things like that, tho I never saw her take one!

We lived there til we was grown. We tilled a little land, raised our own few pigs and chickens, and split one cow[14] with another family for the milk. She raised us, or helped us raise ourselves.

Older sister quit the little schoolhouse when she was bout fifteen years old in the eighth or ninth grade and got married to a real light man. She just had to have that real light man! In a couple years she had two children, both girls. The light man left, or she left him and came home. Aunt Ellen said, "NO, no! I ain't holdin up no leaning poles! If you old enough to spread them knees and make babies, you old enough to take care yourself! You done stepped out into the rain, now you learn to swim!" Older cried a little cause I guess she was scared of the world, but Aunt Ellen took her round to find a job and a place to live. We baby-sat for her til she was steady. One day we looked up and she was on her own! And smiling! Not cause she was doing so good, but because she was taking care herself and her children and didn't have to answer to nobody! When her man came back, she musta remembered Mama, cause she didn't let him in to make no more babies!

Middle sister went on to the ninth grade, then went to nursing school. Just the kind teach[15] you how to clean up round a patient. Aunt Ellen was proud. She was getting older, but not old yet, and said she would help anybody wanted to go to school long as they got a job and helped themselves too, and she did. That left only me home with her, but I didn't want to go nowhere away from her!

We didn't have no money, helping Middle go to school and taking care of ourselves. I couldn't even think of getting clothes and all those kind of things! I had me[16] one good dress and a good pair of patent-leather shoes I wore to church every Sunday. So after I got out the ninth grade I asked a lady who sewed for a livin to teach me in exchange for housework and she did. That's why I know there's some nice white people who will help you. After I learned, she would pay me a little to do little things like collars, seams and things. Then I still watched her and learned more for free! I sewed for Aunt Ellen and me and Older's babies. We saved money that way. That's the same way I learned to play the piano…sewing for the piano teacher. I got to be pretty good. Got paid a little to play at weddings. Cause I won't charge for no funerals. Death already cost too much!

Middle graduated from that school, well, got out. Cause all they did was ask her was she all paid up and when she said yes, they handed her a paper said she was completed. She got married right soon after that to somebody working in a hospital and they moved to a city that had more hospitals to work in. Soon she had a baby girl. Another girl was good, but where was all our boy children? They necessary[17] too!

One evening after a good dinner, me and Aunt Ellen sat out on the porch. I was swinging and she was rockin as she whittled some wood makin a stool for her leg that had started giving her trouble. She wanted something to prop it up on. Mosquitoes and firebugs was buzzing round us. She turned to me and said, "You know, I'm glad you all came along to my life. I did a lot of things I might never have got to, and now I'm glad they done! I got a family and a home too! I believe we gonna make that swim to the top of the rain! Things seem to be workin out alright! You all are fine girls and I'm proud of you. You gon be alright!"

Pleased, I laughed. "Aunty, you can't swim goin straight up! You can't swim the rain! You got to swim the river or the lake!"

She smiled. "Life is more like the rain. The river and the lake lay down for you. All you got to do is learn how to swim fore you go where they are and jump in. But life don't do that. You always gets the test fore you learn the swimming lesson, unexpected, like rain. You don't go to the rain, the rain comes to you. Anywhere, anytime. You got to prepare for it!…protect yourself! And if it keeps coming down on you, you got to learn to swim to the top through the dark clouds, where the sun is shining on that silver lining."

She wasn't laughing, so I didn't either. I just thought about what she said till I went to sleep. I still ain't never forgot it.

The next day when dinner was ready, Aunt Ellen hadn't come in from the fields and it got to be dark. Finally the mule came home dragging the plow. I went out to look for her, crying as I walked over the plowed rows, screaming her name out, cause I was scared I had lost my Aunt Mama. I had.

I found her under a tree, like she was sleeping. Had a biscuit with a little ham in it, still in her hand. But she wasn't sleeping, she was dead. I couldn't carry her in and wouldn't leave her alone so just stayed out there holding her all night long. A kind neighbor found us the next day, cause he noticed the mule draggin the plow and nobody home.

I sewed Aunt Ellen's shroud to be buried in. I played the piano at her funeral too. Her favorite song, "My Buddy." I would have done anything for her. I loved her, my Aunt Mama, She taught me so much. All I knew to make my life with.

I was alone again.

Older and I buried her. Middle didn't come, but sent $10.00

I gave the preacher $5.00 and stuck the other $5.00 in Aunt Ellen's pocket, thinking, All your money passed out to us...Take this with you. Later, I planted turnips and mustard greens all round her homemade grave, cause she liked them best. Then...that part of my life was over.

I was alone again, oh Lord. Trying to see through the rain.

You ever been alone? Ain't had nobody? Didn't know what to do? Where to turn? I didn't. I was alone even with my sisters living. This was my life and what was I to do with it?

The house and land belonged to all of us. I tried to stay in that cabin, intended to, but it was too lonely out there. Specially when all the men started passing there late at night, stopping, setting. Rain coming to me just like Aunt Ellen said. I didn't want to be rained on, so I gave it out to a couple without a home and moved on down there where my middle sister was, in the city. I got a job living-in and was making a little extra and saving by doing sewing. I was hunting out a future.

I went to church a lot. I stick close to God cause when you need a friend, you need one you can count on! Not the preacher...but God! I steered clear of them men who try to get a working woman and live off her itty-bitty money. I ain't got to tell you about them! They dress and sit while she work! No! No! My aunt taught me how not to be scared without a man til the right one comes, and that's why I'll have something for him when he gets here!

I met that nice man, a very hard-working man at a church social. Was me and a real light woman liking him and I thought sure he would take to her, but he took to me. I waited for a long time, til after we were married to ask him why, cause he might think of something I didn't want him to think of. He told me "I like her, I think she a fine woman, a good woman. But you can't like somebody just cause they light! Ain't no white man done me no favor by making no black woman a baby! What I care most bout skin is that it fits! Don't sag...or shrink when it gets wet!" He say, "I love your outsides and your insides, cause you a kind and lovin woman who needs a lotta love and don't mind lettin me know it! I need love too!" Then I knew I could love him with ease. And I did, through the years that passed.

My husband was a railroad-working man so we was pretty soon able to buy us a little home and I was able to stay in it and not go out to work. I made a little extra money with my sewing and teaching piano lessons. We was doing alright! We both wanted children but didn't seem to start up none, so I naturally came to take up more time with my nieces. That's when I came to know the meaning of the big importance of who raises you and who you raising!

I had urged Older to come to the city with her two girls, they were bout fourteen and fifteen years old round then. Middle didn't have no husband now, and her daughter was bout thirteen years old. I could see, tho they was all from one family, they had such different ways of doing things! With my husband gone two or three days a week, I had time to get to know them more.

Now, Older, she the one with the two daughters, she did everything for the oldest pretty, light one, leaving the other one out a lot. The oldest one had more and better clothes and was a kinda snotty[18] girl. Demanding...always demanding! She was going to be a doctor, she said, and true enough she studied hard. She volunteered at the hospitals a lot. Getting ready, she said. She was picky bout her clothes and since her mama didn't make too much money and wouldn't let her work, she was always asking me to sew for her or do her hair. Her best friend was a white girl, live up the street, from a nice family.

I took to sewing, buying the material myself, for the youngest brownskin one. She was a little hard of hearing and didn't speak as prettily and clearly as her older sister, so they was always putting her off or back, or leaving her home when they go out. Now, she was not college-smart, but she was common-sense smart and a good decent girl, treated people right. That's what I like, so I helped her! She was never asking for nothing but was grateful for the smallest thing you did for her. That kind of person makes me remember my aunts and I will work my butt off[19] for people like that! I was closest to her.

I spent time with Middle too. I love my family. Her daughter, thirteen or fourteen years old, was a nice quiet girl. At least I thought she was quiet. I found out later she was beaten under. She was scared to be herself. Her mother, Middle, had turned down her natural spirit! You know, some of them things people try to break in their children are things they may need when they get out in that world when Mama and Papa ain't there! The child was tryin to please her mama and was losing herself! And she wasn't bad to begin with! Now, it's good for a child to mind its mama, but then the mama got to be careful what she tells that child to do! She's messing with her child's life!

Middle was mad one day and told me she had whipped the child for walkin home holding hands with a boy! I told Middle, "Ain't nothing wrong with holding hands! Specially when you heading home where your mama is! Humans will be human! Some people wish their fourteen-year-old daughter was only holding hands!" I told her, "You was almost married when you was her age!" Middle told me I didn't have no kids so I didn't understand! I went home thinking children wasn't nothing but little people living in the same life we was, learning the same things we had to. You just got to understand bout life! I hear people say, "I ain't never been a mother before, how am I supposed to know what to do?" Well, let me tell you, that child ain't never been here before, been a child their age before either! How they always supposed to know what to do, less[20] you teach em! How much do you know to teach em?

Several months later she whipped that girl, hard and long, for kissing a boy in the hallway. I told Middle, "She was in your hallway. What could she do out there and you in here?! If they was planning anything special, they got the whole world out there to hide in!" Middle said, "I wish she was just out there holdin hands walking home, stead of this stuff!" I looked at her trying to understand why she didn't understand when she was well off. "While you think you whipping something out of her, you may be whippen' something in! Talk to her more. Are you all friends? You know, everybody need a friend!"

She was so sad, my sister, I asked her, "Why don't you think about gettin married again? Get you some kissin stuff? Then maybe natural things won't look so dirty to you! You can be a mama and a wife, stead of a warden!" Middle just screwed up her face and say she know what she doing! Sadness all gone...madness too close. Things you feel sposed to make you think bout em![21] Think how you can help yourself. Hers didn't. She say, "The last thing I need is a man messing up my life again!" Well, it was her business, but it looked to me like she was gettin close to the last thing! I told my niece if she ever need a friend, come to me. I was her aunt and her friend, just like Aunt Ellen was to me! I left.

Life is something, chile![22] Sometime watching over other folks' life can make you more tired than just taking care your own!

Older's snotty oldest daughter had graduated with good grades from high school and was going out to find work to help send herself to college. Both she and her white girlfriend planned to go to college, but the white friend's family had planned ahead and had insurance for education. They both went out together to find work. They went to that hospital where Oldest's daughter had volunteered steady, spending all kinds of time and energy in most all the departments there. Her friend hadn't. But when they had their interviews, her friend got the job! Well, my niece was just done in or out, either one or both! But her white friend told her, "I'm a minority, aren't I? I'm a female! At least one of us got it! That's better than some man getting it!" Ms. Snotty just looked at her and I don't think they're friends anymore, least not so close. Anyway, my niece wrote a pack of letters and a month or so later, she went on East and got a job. I can tell you now, she didn't become no doctor, but she is a head nurse of a whole hospital. Her mama surenuff[23] scrimped and saved and made herself and her other daughter go without to keep that girl in school. I was giving my other niece all she had to keep her from feeling too neglected. I loved that girl! I loved them both, but people with certain kinda needs just get me!

Middle had told her daughter, "No company til you are eighteen years old and through with school!" But she didn't give her the hugs and kisses and touches we all need. So the girl found her own. She was sixteen years old now, and she had gotten pregnant. She and the boy wanted to get married but Middle beat her and demanded on her to get an abortion. The girl wouldn't have one, so Middle was going to show her how her evil ways had cost her her mother, and how lost she would be without her! She put her child out of her rented house! Her own child! Seem like that was the time for Middle to act like the mother she was always demanding respect for! That was going to be her own grandchild! But...she put her out. I didn't know it and that poor child didn't come to me.... What had I missed doing or saying to show her I was her friend? Oh Lord, I prayed for her safety. You know on the other side of your door sits the whole world. The good people are mostly home taking care of their family and business. It's the liars, thieves, rapers, murderers, pimps, sadistics, dopers, crazy people who are out there...waiting...just for someone without no experience. Thems who that child was out there with, the minute her mama slammed that front door! And a belly full of baby, no man and no mama. It's some things you don't have to live to understand. I wanted my grandniece. I would have taken care of it for her. And Middle would love her grandchile. It's a mighty dumb fool won't let their own heart be happy! If she was worrying bout feeding it...she got fed! And didn't have no mama! Trying to show what a fool her daughter was, she showed what a fool she was! Your chile is your heart, your flesh, your blood! And sometimes, your way! Anyway, life goes on. I couldn't find her til way later.

Older's daughter had done graduated and was a surgical or surgeon nurse, and had her own place and car and everything! Older was planning to go visit her and did, leaving the youngest daughter to stay home and watch the house with my help. When Older got back she was hurt and mad. She didn't want to tell it, but we finally got it out of her. Her snotty daughter had made her wear a maid's uniform, the one she had for her regular jobs. She had to cook and answer the door and stay out the way when company came! Not tell nobody that was her daughter! Can you believe...even can you imagine that?! Her mother!? Well, it's true, she did and she still does it! Then shame of all shames possible to snotty sister, her young sister got a job as a maid in a whorehouse! Snotty and Middle hated that, but she made such good money, tips and all, and the girls giving her jewels and discarded furs and clothes and all. They wanted to use them, borrow her money, but seem to hate her. Two ways. For having these things and for being low enough to work as a maid in a whorehouse! They made her sad. She was trying to swim to the top of the rain in her own way. I tried to love her enough, but there ain't nothin like your own mama's love!

Bout that time somebody told us about Middle's daughter. She was a prostitute trying to pay her own way, raising her daughter, living alone. She didn't have time to find a job before she started starving, so this was a way. She was trying to swim to the top of the rain, but was drowning. Middle took a gun down on that street and threatened to kill her! I talked to the young woman. She was still a good girl, just lost! But, loving her baby! That baby had everything! Was the fattest, cutest, sweetest smiling baby I ever seen! Ohhh, how I wanted that baby! And I knew the pain, the great big pain I could see in her face she was going through. Who wants to sell their body? The only thing, no matter how long you live, that is truly yours, is your body. I don't care how much money you got!

Later, Middle told me, "Ohhhhh, I wish she was home just having one of them illegal babies! Oh, just to have her back home holding hands, or kissing in the hallway, even having that baby! I should a let her marry that boy when they wanted to! I'd rather kill her than see her be a prostitute!" She hurt and I could see it. It was the first time she had even blamed herself a little bit for her part in all this. I had a little hope for her.

The daughter brought the baby her mother had tried to make her get rid of and let her keep it sometime. Middle loved that grandchile so much, cause you see, she didn't have nothin else in her life. It was empty! I kept it whenever I could. That girl, her daughter, stayed sad...sad...sadder. She would look around her mama's house and make a deep sigh and go away looking hopeless. Her mama told her to come home, but she said it was too late.

I got involved round that time with Older's youngest daughter. She had fallen in love and was bout to marry a blind man. I thought that was good after I met him. He was so good-seeming, so kind to her, so sweet and gentle with her. My sister was going crazy cause he was blind! She didn't even think of his honesty and kindness and love for her daughter. She could only see he was blind. Oh Lord, deliver the innocent from some fools that be mothers, fathers and sisters. She married him anyway, bless her heart, and my sister had a heart attack...a real one! Her daughter she didn't love so much and her blind husband took care of her, better than she took care herself when she could. Her nurse daughter, said she couldn't! Didn't have time.

I was so busy being in my family's business I hadn't been in my own enough! My husband, have mercy, told me he was leavin me cause he had met someone he might could love and she was pregnant! I looked at him for bout a hour, it seemed, cause he was my life but I hadn't been actin like it! Been giving everybody else all my thoughts, time and life. But I had done learned bout happiness and I understood if he wasn't happy here, he should be where he was happy! Ain't that what we all live for? How could I get mad at a man who had give" me everything, including the chance to make him happy? I washed, cleaned, packed his clothes, and let him go, clean away. Then I went in the house, took the biggest bottle of liquor I could find, sat down and drank for bout a week. Now, I ain't crazy and a hangover ain't the best feeling in the world. Life started again in me and bless my soul, even alone, I was still alive!

I went out in my…my yard and saw one lone red flower dug it up and took it in the house. I told it, "You and me, we alone. We can survive! I'm going to plant you and make you grow. I'm going to plant me and make me grow. I'm going to swim to the top of this rain!" I planted it, it wilted, it lay down even. I let it alone cept for care. Let it grieve for its natural place. I loved it, I talked to it. I went and put it back outside, it's my yard too! It could be mine and still be free where it wanted to be! In a day or two, it took hold again…it's still livin! Me, I just kept carrying on with my swim.

I hadn't seen nobody, cause I didn't want to be bothered with their problems, I had my own! Then Middle came to me. My niece was in the hospital, dying from a overdose of dope in her veins! Ohh Lord!

When I got to the hospital, I stood in the door and listened to my sister talk to her daughter who could not hear her."Don't die, my little girl, don't die! Stay with me. You all I got. What I'm gonna do…if you die? Stay with me, don't leave me alone. Hold hands with anybody you wants to! I won't say nothing! Kiss anybody you want to…I won't mind at all. Just don't leave me, my baby! Have many babies as you want! I'll love em all! Don't go. Child of mine, you can even be a prostitute. I don't care! Just live. I rather see you on dope than see you dead! Cause if you got life, you got a chance to change Baby, I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Be anything you want …JUST LIVE…don't die! Come home! Don't die!" She screamed that out and I went in to help her grieve… cause the beautiful young woman was dead.

After the funeral, the good thing Middle had left was the baby she had tried to make her daughter get rid of. Her daughter had won that battle at the cost of her life, it seemed…so now, Middle was blessed to have someone to love and be with…in her empty life. I went on home to my empty life.

Things smoothed down. God is good. They always smooth down if you give life time.

One day, bout a year later, my doorbell rang and when I answered it, my husband was standing there with a baby in his arms who reached out for me the minute I opened the door. I reached back! I ain't no fool! He had got that young woman he thought he loved and she had got him, but after the baby was born, my husband wanted to rest and stay home when she wanted to play and go out. She left him with his baby. I tried to look sad for him, but my heart said, "Good, Good, Good!"

But he didn't look too sad. We talked and talked and talked and talked! I loved my husband and I knew he loved me, even better now. He wanted to come home and I wanted him home. And I wanted that baby. It was his and I musta not been able and she was. How lucky I felt that if I couldn't have one, he had give me one anyway. We didn't need to get married, we still was. Neither one of us had gone to the courts, thinkin the other one would. So I had a family.

Sometimes I hold my baby boy and look deep in his little bright, full of life eyes. I know something is coming in the coming years cause life ain't easy to live all the time. Even rich folks commit suicide. But I tell my boy, like my aunt told me, "Just come on, grow up, we gonna make it, little man, right through the storms! We gonna take our chances…and get on out there and take our turn…swimming to the top of the rain!"

NOTES ON THE STORY

1. *They mostly* = They are mostly. In some forms of Black English the present tense form of be is deleted in statements of general truth
2. *You ain't never known nobody didn't have one* = You haven't ever known anyone who didn't have one. Note the multiple negation in the main clause which is a feature of Black English
3. *to make it to*: to reach
4. *She had been done working*: the auxiliary *done* is inserted in Black English for emphasis
5. *Probly* = Probably
6. *Cause wasn't nowhere else* = Because there wasn't anywhere else
7. *bout* = about
8. *trying to do for us*: trying to support us
9. *We had never really been full too steady*: We had not had a lot to eat very often
10. *We was*: The singular form of the *be* verb past tense form may be used with both singular or plural subjects in some varieties of Black English
11. *case* = in case; if
12. *I just peed*: I wet my pants; I urinated
13. *blived* = believed. The spelling represents the speaker's pronunciation
14. *split one cow*: we shared a cow, i.e., we were part owners of a cow with another family
15. *Just the kind teach* = just the kind that teaches
16. *I had me*: I had; I owned. Non-standard varieties of English may use this construction to show possession
17. *They necessary too!* = they are necessary too
18. *snotty*: impolite, rude
19. *work my butt off*: (slang) work very hard
20. *less you teach em!* = unless you teach them
21. *Things you feel sposed to make you think bout em!* = Things that you feel emotionally should be thought about rationally
22. *chile* = child
23. *surenuff* = sure enough
24. *whorehouse*: (slang) house of prostitution
25. *had give* = had given. Some varieties of Black English will use the simple form of the verb in perfective constructions

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What did Aunt Ellen mean when she talked about "swimming to the top of the rain?"*
2. *How is Care different from her sisters, Older (Angel) and Middle (Better)? Why does she seem to be more successful "swimming to the top of the rain?"*
3. *What major problems do Care and her sisters have to face?*
4. *What role do men play in the story? What is your reaction to this portrayal?*
5. *Choose one scene from the story and dramatize it.*

The long Street

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI

In this poem, life is a long street that goes all around the world and is filled with all kinds of people. It moves along like a long passenger train; and its lively, colorful passengers are curious to know where their journey will finally end.

The long street
which is the street of the world
passes around the world
filled with all the people of the world
not to mention all the voices
of all the people
that ever existed
Lovers and weepers
virgins and sleepers
spaghetti salesmen and sandwichmen[1]
milkmen and orators
boneless bankers
brittle[2] housewives
sheathed in nylon snobberies[3]
deserts of advertising men
herds of high school fillies[4]
crowds of collegians[5]
all talking and talking
and walking around or hanging out windows
to see what's doing
out in the world
where everything happens
sooner or later
If it happens at all
And the long street
which is the longest street
In all the world
but which isn't as long
as it seems
passes on
thru all the cities and all the scenes
down every alley
up every boulevard
thru every crossroads
thru red lights and green lights
cities in sunlight
continents in rain
hungry Hong Kongs
untillable Tuscaloosas[6]
Oaklands of the soul[7]
Dublins of the Imagination[8]
And the long street
rolls on around
like an enormous choochoo train[9]
chugging[10] around the world
with its bawling[11] passengers
and babies and picnic baskets
and cats and dogs
and all of them wondering
just who is up
In the cab[12] ahead
driving the train
If anybody
the train which runs around the world
like a world going round
all of them wondering
just what is up
If anything
and some of them leaning out
and peering[13] ahead
and trying to catch up
a look at the driver
In his one-eye cab
trying to see him
to glimpse his face
to catch his eye
as they whirl around a bend
but they never do
although once in a while
it looks as if
they're going to
And the street goes rocking on
the train goes bowling on[14]
with its windows reaching up
its windows the windows
of all the buildings
in all the streets of the world
bowling along
thru the light of the world
thru the night of the world
with lanterns at crossings
lost lights flashing

crowds at carnivals
nightwood circuses
whorehouses[15] and parliaments
forgotten fountains
cellar doors and unfound doors
figures in lamplight
pale idols[16] dancing
as the world rocks on
But now we come
to the lonely part of the street
the part of the street
that goes around
the lonely part of the world
And this is not the place
that you change trains
for the Brighton Beach Express[17]
This is not the place
that you do anything
This is the part of the world
where nothing's doing
where no one's doing
anything
where nobody's anywhere
nobody nowhere
except yourself
not even a mirror
to make you two
not a soul
except your own
maybe
and even that
not there
maybe
or not yours
maybe
because you're what's called
dead
you've reached your station

Descend

NOTES ON THE POEM

1. sandwichmen: men who carry sandwich (advertising) boards over their shoulders on the street
2. brittle: easily broken
3. sheathed in nylon snobberies: dressed in nylon stockings
4. herds of high school fillies: groups of active young girls (like a team of young racing horses)
5. collegians: college/university students
6. untillable Tuscaloosas: (poetic) barren lands (where nothing will grow)
7. Oaklands of the soul: (poetic) dreary, unimaginative suburbs, dead areas of the mind
8. Dublins of the imagination: (poetic) crowded slum areas (where the mind can't live)
9. choochoo train: a child's name for a train
10. chugging: moving slowly like an old train
11. bawling: crying loudly
12. cab: the engine compartment of a train
13. peering: peeking out (of a window)
14. bowling on: rolling along (on a road or track)
15. whorehouses: houses of prostitution
16. idols: figures that people worship
17. Brighton Beach Express: commuter train from downtown Manhattan to Brighton Beach in Brooklyn

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *What kinds of places does the long street go through?*
2. *The poet metaphorically links the long street to a train. Who are the travellers on the train?*
3. *What are the people on the train doing? What are they thinking?*
4. *Who is in the one-eye cab? How can you interpret this?*
5. *What is the poet doing (in the poem form) to create a more dramatic ending? (How are the lines at the ending different from the beginning parts?)*

biographies

Toni Cade Bambara (1939-)
Born and educated in New York City, Toni Cade Bambara is a well-known and respected civil rights activist, writer and university teacher. She has published two collections of short stories—*Gorilla, My Love* (1972) and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977)—and two novels, *The Salt Eaters* (1980) and *If Blessing Comes* (1987).

Mary Whitebird
Mary Whitebird is a member of the Kaw tribe and many of her stories are biographical in content, recounting her life living within and between the two cultures.

Thomas Fox Averill (1949-)
Thomas Fox Averill teaches English at Washburn University in Kansas. He is a recipient of the O'Henry award for short-story writing. Many of his stories are set in the American Midwest.

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)
Trained as a pediatrician, Williams practiced medicine in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey, while writing poetry, short stories and novels. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry posthumously for his collection *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962).

Amy Tan (1952-)
A daughter of Chinese immigrants, Amy Tan was born in Oakland, California. She worked as an educational administrator, editor and technical writer before turning to writing fiction. She is known for her semi-autobiographical novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991). She has also written two books for children.

Countee Cullen (1903-1946)
Born in Louisville, Kentucky, Countee Cullen was one of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement among African Americans during the 1920s and 30s. He published two collections of poetry, *Color* (1925) and *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929), and taught in the public schools of New York City.

Richard Wright (1908-1960)
One of the first African American writers to protest White treatment of Blacks, Richard Wright was born in Natchez, Mississippi. To escape poverty, he moved north, first to Memphis, then to Chicago where he began writing through the Federal Writers' Project. His work focused on life in the ghettos and the anger caused by racist actions. He is best known for his novel *Native Son* (1940) and a collection of his short stories published posthumously in *Eight Men* (1961). He settled in Paris as a permanent expatriate in 1954.

John Updike (1932-)
Born in a small town in Pennsylvania, John Updike received his BA from Harvard University and began his writing career as a contributor to The New Yorker magazine. A prolific writer, he is best known for his trilogy, *Rabbit Run* (1960), *Rabbit Redux* (1971), and *Rabbit is Rich* (1990), the latter two books winning Pulitzer prizes in literature. Most of his fiction is set in New England where he lives.

Ray Bradbury (1920-)
Ray Bradbury was born in Waukegan, Illinois but moved to California while still a child. He is best known for his science-fiction stories and novels which explore the impact that scientific development has on human lives. He combines social criticism with an awareness that technology alone cannot solve the problems of society. *The Martial Cronicles* (1950) is regarded as his best work. It was followed by *Dandelion Wine* (1957) and numerous short story collections. He wrote the screen play for the John Huston film version of *Moby Dick* (1956) and has expanded his writing to include poetry, children's stories, and crime fiction.

Juan Delgado (1960-)
Juan Delgado's poems have appeared in Best New Chicano Literature, 1989. He also wrote the novel *My Green Army*.

Eugenia Collier (1928-)
After a conventional liberal arts education, Collier writes that she discovered the richness, diversity, and beauty of her black heritage. She lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland.

E.L. Doctorow (1931-)
Born in New York City, he obtained degrees in English from Kenyon College in Ohio and Columbia University. He worked on the editorial staff of New American Library before leaving to teach at the university level. Doctorow has written successfully in a number of literary genres including the western, science fiction, historical fiction, poetry, and the short story. He is best known for *The Book of Daniel* (1971), *Ragtime* (1975), and *Billy Bathgate* (1989).

Shirley Jackson (1919-1965)
Shirley Jackson was born in San Francisco, California, educated at Syracuse University in New York, and resided in Bennington Vermont. A novelist and short story writer, she is best known as a writer of gothic horror and suspense though she also wrote light, comic pieces and two fictionalized memoirs about her happy married life.

Her story "The Lottery" (1948) generated widespread public outrage when it was published in The New Yorker magazine. Her other works include *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962).

Alice Walker (1944-)
Born in a small town in Georgia, Alice Walker is known for her insightful treatment of African American culture in her poems, short stories, and novels. She won the Pulitzer prize in Literature for her novel The Color Purple (1982). Her publications include In Love and In Trouble: Stories of Black Women (1973), Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems (1973), The Temple of My Familiar (1989) and Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992).

William Saroyan 1908-1981)
Son of Armenian immigrants, William Saroyan was born in Fresno, California and devoted most of his life to writing about the people he had known there. He came to early prominence during the Great Depression with his stories celebrating the basic goodness of people and the joy of living. His best known work includes the play *The Time of Your Life* (1939), the short story collection *My Name is Aram* (1940) and the novel *The Human Comedy* (1943).

Max Apple (1941-)
Born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Max Apple holds a PhD. in English and is a professor at Rice University in Texas. Known for the comic intelligence and satire of his stories, he presents a critical but loving picture of contemporary American life. He has written three novels, *Zip: A Novel of the Left and Right* (1978), *The Profiteers* (1987), and *Roommates: My Grandfather's Story* (1994). His short story collections include *The Oranging of America* (1976) and *Free Agents* (1984).

Diane Glancy (1941-)
Diane Glancy teaches creative writing at Macalester College in Minnesota. She has published several collections of poetry and short stories about Native Americans

Eudora Welty (1909-)
Born in Jackson Mississippi, Eudora Welty has resided there for most of her life, and her work cronicles the manners and speech of the people of that region. In her short stories and novels, she uses humor and psychological insight to explore social prejudice and human insensitivity. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Optimist's Laughter* (1972). Her other publications include *The Ponder Heart* (1955), *Losing Battles* (1971), *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984).

John Cheever (1912-1982)
The short stories and novels of John Cheever describe the life, manners, and morals of middle-class America. Born in Quincy, Massachusetts, Cheever is known as a master of the short story. He won a Pulitzer Price for Fiction in 1978 for The Stories of John Cheever. His novels include The *Wapshot Chronicle* (1957), *The Wapshot Scandal* (1964), and *Oh What a Paradise It Seems* (1982).

Bienvenido N. Santos (1911-)
Born in the Philippines, Bienvenido Santos came to the United States during World War II, and has spent much of his career traveling back and forth between the two countries. His works include several short story collections, *You Lovely People* (1955) and *The Day the Dancers Came* (1979) and novels *Villa Magdalena* (1965) and *What the Hell for You Left Your Heart in San Francisco* (1987).

John Collier (1901-1980)
A novelist, writer of history and short stories, poet, and playwright, John Collier was born and raised in England but found that Americans appreciated his work more than the British.

Woody Allen (1935-)
Born Allen Stewart Konigsberg in Brooklyn New York, Woody Allen is better known as a comedian, screenwriter, and film director than he is for his writings. He began his career as a writer for television comics and performed as a stand-up comedian in nightclubs, on television, and on stage. He won Academy Awards for his direction of the film *Annie Hall* (1977) and for his screenplays for Annie Hall and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1987). He has written several collections of humor including *Getting Even* (1971) and *Side Effects* (1980).

Marshall N. Klimasewiski
Born and raised in Connecticut, Marshall Klimasewiski is a freelance writer. His stories have appeared in *The New Yorker, Ploughshares*, and elsewhere.

James Thurber (1894-1961)
Born in Columbus Ohio, James Thurber is known for his stories and cartoons about the common man beset by the modern world. He worked as managing editor and staff writer for The New Yorker magazine in its early years, and remained one of its leading contributors until his death. Failing eyesight and eventual blindness forced Thurber to give up his drawing but his cartoons enlivened many pages of The New Yorker as well as the book *Is Sex Necessary?* (1929) which he co-authored with E.B. White. His collections of stories include *My Life and Hard Times* (1933) and *Fables for Our Time* (1940). He also wrote two enormously successful fairy tales for children, *The 13 Clocks* (1950) and *The Wonderful O* (1957).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)
Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a leading figure in the women's movement in the United States. Years before it was politically correct, Gilman wrote In Women and Economics (1898) that economic independence was necessary before women could enjoy full freedom. In 1915, she was a co-founder of the Women's Peace Party. Her publications include *The Man-Made World* (1911), *His Religion and Hers* (1923), and *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (1935).

Isaac Asimov (1920- 1992)
Born in Russia, Asimov was taken to the United States when he was three years old. A Biochemist and a faculty member of Boston University, Asimov is better known for his science fiction writings and science books for lay readers. He once said, "I'm on fire to ex-plain, and happiest when it's something reasonably intricate which I can make clear step by step." His publications include *The Foundation Trilogy* (1963), *Nightfall and Other Stories* (1969), and *The Bicentennial Man* (1976). He is credited with coining the term robotics.

Arthur Gordon (1912-)
Born in Savannah Georgia, Gordon went on to study at Yale University and at Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He served as managing editor for several popular American magazines while doing freelance writing which included biographies, short stories, and histories.

Donna Kate Rushin
Donna Kate Rushin was born in New Jersey and received her college education at Oberlin College in Ohio. She has published *This Bridge is Called My Back* and *The Black Back-ups*. She works as a "Poet-in-the-schools."

I.S. Nakata
I.S. Nakata published his charming short story *A Haircut* in a literary journal of Cornell College, Mt. Vernon, Iowa. While his story has been anthologized elsewhere, no further information about him is available to us.

Diane Burns (1950-)
Diane Burns is a freelance writer and artist. She is descendent from the Anishinabe and Chemehuevi nations, and this native American heritage is evident in her writings and her paintings.

Sylvia A. Watanabe
Sylvia Watanabe was born in Hawaii on the island of Maui. She is a recipient of the Japanese American Citizens League National Literary Award. "In my fiction, I like to explore the forces which bring people of different cultures together, and try to imagine the possible conflicts and new cultural forms which might arise out of these meetings."

Studs Terkel (1912-)
Journalist and broadcaster, TV comentator, Hollywood actor, and writer, Studs Terkel is a cronicler of American life. A resident of Chicago, he drew upon his contact with the people of that city for a number of his award-winning publications. His books include: *Working, The Good War*, and *American Dreams: Lost and Found*.

J. California Cooper
J. California Cooper writes stories that capture the joy and heartbreak of her people. An intensely private person, she does not engage in media promotion of herself or her writings. Her large and loyal following is the result of Cooper's ability to make personal connections with people through the written word. Her publications include *A Piece of Mine, Homemade Love, Some Soul to Keep, Family, The Matter is Life*, and *In Search of Satisfaction*.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1920-)
Born in Yonkers, New York, Lawrence Ferlinghetti was one of the founders of the Beat Movement, a social and literary movement of the 1950s advocating personal release, purification, and increased sensory awareness. His City Lights bookstore in San Francisco was the gathering place for Beat writers and the publishing house for much of their work. His own publications include *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), and *Endless Love* (1981).

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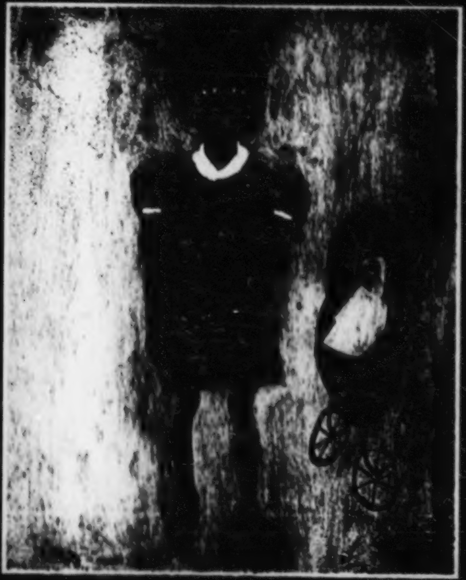

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